

# **The Infinite Longing for Home**

**Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of  
Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam**

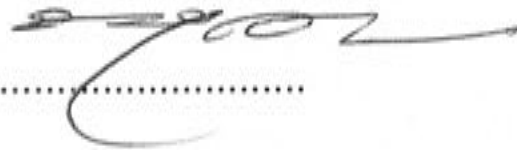
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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
of The Australian National University  
November 2002**

## Declaration

Unless where otherwise stated, this thesis is my own work.

Signed .....

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lim Chong Lim', written over a dotted line.

Lim Chong Lim  
November 2002



## Acknowledgements

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## **Abstract**

### **The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam**

This thesis sets out to examine Okri's and Maniam's problematisation of 'the good society' within and beyond the context of Nigeria and Malaysia. It looks into the motives and means by which peoples forced to live together in a country love and hate each other and the knowledge that contains the truth about themselves. It examines why some people embrace heterogeneity and open-endedness while others are internally compelled to cling to absolutes, spin out ideological narratives of "why did things go wrong", elaborate on the Obstacles standing in the way of their final self-realisation, and organise their lives around the fantasy that "if only we were to get rid of Them, . . . everything would be OK" (Žižek 1999e). Lastly, this thesis traces in Okri's and Maniam's selected writings a way out of today's political aporia, a path to true freedom and the creation of a new society humbled and unified by the recognition of its participation in flawed humanity.

The primary literary texts we have chosen to study in this thesis are the three volumes of Okri's abiku trilogy, namely *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, and Maniam's two novels, *The Return* and *In a Far Country*, as well as two of his short stories, 'Booked for Life' and 'Haunting

the Tiger'. Our examination of these texts is informed by a range of theoretical perspectives on key notions like subjectivity, causality and agency. It draws largely on Jacques Lacan's teachings in psychoanalysis, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of hegemony and especially Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology and reactualisation of Hegelian dialectics.

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## Abbreviations and References

Page references to these special texts will follow the abbreviations given below. All other references will be by author and year of publication, as compiled at the end of this thesis, under 'List of Works Consulted'.

### Okri

|                             |             |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| <i>The Famished Road</i>    | <i>TFR</i>  |
| <i>Songs of Enchantment</i> | <i>SOE</i>  |
| <i>Infinite Riches</i>      | <i>IR</i>   |
| <i>Astonishing the Gods</i> | <i>ATG</i>  |
| 'Stars of the New Curfew'   | <i>SONC</i> |

### Maniam

|                         |            |
|-------------------------|------------|
| <i>The Return</i>       | <i>TR</i>  |
| <i>In a Far Country</i> | <i>IFC</i> |
| 'Booked for Life'       | <i>BFL</i> |
| 'Haunting the Tiger'    | <i>HTT</i> |
| <i>Between Lives</i>    | <i>BL</i>  |

Below are the abbreviations of the key political parties frequently referenced in this thesis:

### Nigeria

|      |                                       |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| AG   | Action Group                          |
| NCNC | National Council of Nigerian Citizens |
| NPC  | Northern People's Congress            |

### Malaysia

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Keadilan | Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) |
| MCA      | Malaysian Chinese Association                    |
| MIC      | Malaysian Indian Congress                        |
| PAS      | Parti Islam Sa-Melayu (Pan-Malaysian Islamic     |
| UMNO     | United Malay National Organisation<br>Party)     |

# INTRODUCTION

Desire is an infinite metonymy, it slides from one object to another. [Its] 'natural' state is thus that of melancholy – the awareness that no positive object is 'it', its proper object, that no positive object can ever fill out its constitutive lack. (Žižek 1997a: 81)

## The Premise

In the Beginning, before the emergence of the Word, there was nothing, nothing but an internal churning of unbearable longing and sadness. 'Nature', in Slavoj Žižek's reading of F.W.J Schelling's philosophy, is permeated with melancholy because although it yearns to reach and define itself, it is unable to do so since the medium of expression is not yet given. That is why the emergence of the Word in man is seen as an answer to Nature's deadlock. "It is as if living nature itself was secretly pointing towards, waiting and longing for, the emergence of *logos* as its redemption" (Žižek 2000d: 88). With the spoken word Nature is redeemed. But redemption comes at the price of its alienation from itself, of the externalisation of the power of its centre in a medium outside itself, in man, the subject of enunciation who is "not part of nature, but Nature's Other" (1997b: 43).



According to Žižek, the above logic of symbolisation, redemption and alienation applies also to the subject as conceptualised by Jacques Lacan. Prior to subjectivisation, man is not the 'I' of self-experience but a pulsation of drives, a pure melancholic *Wollen* ('Willing') for something obscure (Žižek 1996b: 14). It is only and precisely by means of his<sup>1</sup> passage from the closed circuit of drives to the open world of signs that man acquires being. Signifiers give him his moorings and reference points, a sense of definition and equilibrium. It opens up for him a distance from himself, a space in which he can begin to discover his 'real' meaning. But words ultimately fail. We can never say it all or say enough about who we 'really' are, capture ourselves in language. Language simultaneously creates and displaces us from ourselves, and it is in the searching movement of language that we become metaphorised as subjects of desire.

In this thesis, we will see that the above-defined "Schellingian mood" (Žižek 2000d: 87) permeates the writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam too. We will see that Okri's and Maniam's fictional universe is a universe marked by a strange sadness. In it, and in their own ways, its main characters all long to belong, to find that elusive home in themselves and in the fractured country into which they have been thrown. Azaro, the lonely spirit-child protagonist in Okri's abiku trilogy, for example, spends his whole life wandering the road of destiny in

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity's sake, the masculine pronoun will henceforth be used to refer to the subject instead of the cumbersome 'he/she' or the strange-sounding 'it'. This, we should qualify, does not mean that we privilege the male in our discussion.

search of the sublimity of living in a ravaged country not dissimilar to Nigeria. Similarly, Rajan in Maniam's novel *In a Far Country* (IFC) aches to belong in "that vast country . . . called life" (IFC 144) and in Malaysia, a country with "many countries inside that one country" (116).

What is the nature of this infinite longing, this *Gelüst* ('craving that does not involve the head') that propels Okri's and Maniam's characters to experience the world in the way they do? Why is it so central to our investigation? And in what ways is it related to the 'nation' as a concept and to the discourse of nationhood in Nigeria and Malaysia? This thesis is an attempt to answer these questions. It sets out to examine Okri's and Maniam's problematisation of 'the good society' within and beyond the context of their respective homelands. It looks into the motives and means by which peoples forced to live together in a country love and hate each other and the knowledge that contains the truth about themselves. It examines why some people embrace heterogeneity and open-endedness while others are internally compelled to cling to absolutes, spin out ideological narratives of "why did things go wrong", elaborate on the Obstacles standing in the way of their final self-realisation, and organise their lives around the fantasy that "if only we were to get rid of Them, . . . everything would be OK" (Žižek 1999e). Lastly, this thesis traces in Okri's and Maniam's writings a way out of today's political aporia, a path to true freedom and the creation of a new

society humbled and unified by the recognition of its participation in flawed humanity.

## **Subject of Desire**

The primary literary texts we have chosen to study in this thesis are the three volumes of Okri's abiku trilogy, namely *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, and Maniam's two novels, *The Return* and *In a Far Country*, as well as two of his short stories, 'Booked for Life' and 'Haunting the Tiger'. Our examination of these texts is informed by a range of theoretical perspectives on key notions like subjectivity, causality and agency. It draws largely on Jacques Lacan's teachings in psychoanalysis, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of hegemony and especially Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology and reactualisation of Hegelian dialectics.

Our argument begins on the Lacanian premise that desire is "the very dynamic of our being as individual subjects" (Jameson 2002: 50). Desire springs from what we lack inside. But it does not denote, as in common usage, "what I want" since "I do not actually desire what I want" (Žižek 1997b: 80). My desire can never be satisfied by any positive object because what I desire is ultimately impossible, something that cannot be had simply because *it does not exist*. The Lacanian subject is by definition ignorant of the ironic truth about his founding

conditions. In vain he pursues the lost/absent/nonexistent Thing, the Real Object that *causes* his desire (*objet petit a* in Lacanese). He slides from one object to another, saying each time 'this is not it' even when he gets what he asks for. The subject suffers from his belief in the power of the Object. But he also derives *jouissance* ('enjoyment', unbearable traumatic-excessive pleasure in unpleasure, ('pleasure and pain in a single packet') from the infinitely deferred prospect of reuniting with the Object he posits as lost, even though it was never in his possession. His entire being revolves around and is in fact sustained by this strange pleasure which comes at the price of suffering.

Lacan's reformulation of the Freudian subject as an enjoying mistake arising out of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*, 'failure to know') is set out in his famous lecture 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I'. In it, Lacan posits that before the advent of the empirical ego, there is no distinction between self and other, being and non-being, the 'I' and the 'non-I'. The infant, for example, has no consciousness of himself as a distinct self. Being originally a discordant closed circuit of partial drives, he remains thus until somewhere between the age of six and eighteen months when he experiences for the very first time a sense of ontological coherence through the recognition of his own image in the mirror. The startling spectacle of himself 'out there' reflected back at him gives the child great narcissistic joy as he fixes his attitude "in a slightly leaning-forward position in order to hold it in his gaze" (Lacan 2001: 2). But the child's

jubilance is short-lived, for almost as soon as he finds himself in the specular Other, he is snatched away from himself.<sup>2</sup> As Nick Mansfield writes: “Your selfhood – your subjective centre of gravity – is grounded outside of you, in the very field of images from which you first gained a sense of separation. In short, your selfhood makes you alien to yourself” (2000: 43).

The subject is alienated from himself the moment he misrecognises the unitary self in the mirror as himself, and it is this illusory lost unity that the subject strives to re-find upon his entry into the symbolic order. The symbolic is Lacan’s name for the Saussurean world of language. It “provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being” (Lacan, in Stavrakakis 1999: 20). In the semiotic field, words compensate for the Object from which the subject is excommunicated. They allow him to signify his lack, desire and suffering. But words are never enough. The subject will never find full satisfaction in them because of his division by the effects of language. “He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverised, in the circumscribable

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<sup>2</sup> In Lacan’s revised version of his theory of the mirror stage (1960s), the mirror image is invested with libido and internalised as the core of the infant’s ego *only as a result* of the affirmation, acknowledgment or approval of the parent “who is holding the child before the mirror (or watching the child look at itself in the mirror)” (Fink 1997: 88). What is important to note here is that the mirror image does not become formative of the ego unless it is ratified by an-Other person, i.e. caretaker or someone of importance to the child. The child’s desire becomes tied to the approval or recognition of this Other. He internalises what he perceives to be the latter’s ideals, and his actions becomes judged as estimable or shameful according to how he perceives the Other perceives him.



metonymy of speech” (Lacan 1998: 188). Eternally the subject can only signify himself in a system he does not command but which rather commands him.

The Lacanian subject of desire is a subject of discourse, a being-in-language constituted within a particular sociosymbolic network. But he is not nothing but language, an ongoing text or the dispersion of subject positions postulated in the mass-culture version of poststructuralist and postcolonial theories. In Lacan, “everything that I positively am, every enunciated content I can point to and say ‘that’s me,’ is not ‘I’; I am only the void that remains, the empty distance towards every content” (Žižek 1993: 40). That is to say, ‘I’ qua subject is originally devoid of any substantial content. He is the empty point of self-relating and an endless craving for content, for an acceptable conception of himself so that he may walk with assurance in this life. The subject is only subjectivised when he submits to the law of signs, internalises particular “editions” of social discourse and becomes systematised as his own discourse with a “particular itinerary and a particular configuration of attention and response” (Alcorn 1994: 32, 37).

Unlike the Althusserian-Foucauldian subject, the Lacanian subject is not a discourse subjected to the effects of discourse colligation. Lacan’s clinical experience tells him that, far from being simply acted upon, the subject has vast resources for ideological and psychoanalytic *resistance*. Resistance is significant

because, as Marshall W. Alcorn Jr. explains, it “implies agency, an ability to counteract forces that in other contexts would successfully constitute subjects” (Alcorn 1994: 29). The subject has the power of determination to do many things. He can resist and contain conflictual knowledge that threatens to rupture his identity. He can do this by refusing to incorporate certain knowledge into his own discourse system. He can exercise his will to deny, dismiss or deform social directives. He can deny an understanding of the cause of his suffering and *jouissance*. He can disavow knowledge of his identity as a mistake in the Lacanian sense explained earlier. And he can refuse to let go of the only thing he can more or less be sure of, namely his conception of ‘who he really is’, for without it he is nothing.

All that does not mean the Lacanian subject is entirely free to develop according to his personal wants and desires, and shift his identification from one thing to another as he pleases (‘follow your heart’, ‘rewrite your past’ and ‘be yourself’, as the pop-psychology mantra goes). The paradox in Lacan is that the subject is neither fully determined by his surroundings nor by himself but is in the last instance unconsciously predetermined by some senseless contingency, by what Lacan describes as “the first choice, the first seat of subjective orientation [which] will henceforth regulate the entire function of the pleasure principle” (Critchley 1998). Echoing the Freudian “choice of neurosis” (*Neurosenwahl*), this “first grinding” (*mouture première*), which occurs early in the history of the

subject, is a traumatic encounter that forever ‘contaminates’ his psychic development, his choice of passions and ethical imperatives in life.<sup>3</sup> We will return to probe deeper into the subject’s first choice in later chapters, to consider why the subject is, although subjected to his unconscious choice, deemed by Lacan to have chosen it and must therefore be held accountable. For now, let us continue with the task of defining the parameters of this thesis.

## Political Desires

Predisposed by his first grinding and carried along by the force of natural causality, the Lacanian subject actively negotiates and in time arrives at a relatively stable conception of himself, at a master discourse that accounts for his radical lack, for why he does not feel ‘at home’ inside. It is a discourse to which he becomes passionately attached, a knowledge he takes as his truth even though it is full of holes. For example, the subject may be convinced that wherever he goes, he is first and foremost a Malay. He may believe that there is an uncontaminated dividing line between his race and other races, and that members of his race should consolidate their hold on power in the country “regardless of whether it was fair or unfair to the other races” (Lee 1998: 549). Strangely enough, he may still believe all that (and may perhaps even be prepared to suffer

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of the Wolf Man (Freud’s famous patient), for example, it was the accidental witnessing of his parents in *coitus* that gave his life its ‘pathological’ turn.



and die for his belief) even if he knows very well (but cannot bring himself to believe) that race is “not a biological or genetic category with any scientific validity” (Hall 1992: 297-8).

From what we have seen so far, it should be clear that the subject’s pursuit of his desire is not simply an intimate, personal matter to be worked out in the privacy of his interiority. Desiring subjects who believe with absolute certainty that “I AM = I AM KNOWLEDGE = I AM THE ONE WHO KNOWS” can seriously harm those over whom they have power (Ragland 1996: 134). They are what Jacques-Alain Miller describes as “blind masters”, those who rule in order not to see, speak so that others will say they are right, and culpabalize the Other so that the inherent cracks and fissures of being may be papered over. They are also the ones who will “destroy others and wage wars, rather than admit [they] lack anything” (Ragland 1996: 142). Complementing the political blind masters are the “*idiots*” (*idiôtêse*, “foreign to such or such profession, ignorant”), feeble subjects who always require “an Other who will be the master” (Miller 1990: xxv, xxix). They are the ones who find joy in abandoning themselves to the master’s logic, in taking the imperatives it institutes as supreme as truth itself. Finally we have the “nonidiots”, analysts who are “savvy” (Lacan 1990: 3) enough to de-identify with the master discourse and to know that the master place “is never occupied but by what Lacan called a *semblant*, which one might translate into your language as a ‘make-believe’” (Miller 1990: xxx).

In different guises, these three subjects – the master, the idiot and the analyst – are ever-present in Okri's and Maniam's writings which we will be examining. In Parts II and III, we will look at the roles they play and the political dynamics they create in the context of nation-building. This will be done primarily against the background of Nigeria and Malaysia, the postcolonial countries from which the writers respectively originate and in which their works are directly or indirectly set.

Aside from being ex-British colonies, Nigeria and Malaysia face a strikingly similar set of historically entrenched problems. As will be discussed extensively in Part I, the deep racial cleavage, widespread corruption and cronyism, institutional contempt for basic human rights, the rise of militant Islamism, and the upsurge of tribalism/racism are but some of the more serious problems. In addition, we will see that above and beyond the standard *realpolitik* contestation for wealth, power and limited economic resources, there is something else at stake: *jouissance* ('enjoyment') as a hidden political factor. As we mentioned earlier, *jouissance* is the disavowed pleasure the subject derives from the way he relates to the primordially lost object-cause of his desire. It is that uncanny excess of pleasure, envy, shame and horror that 'washes over' the subject when he imagines the Other (e.g. Jew, Igbo, Chinese and other demonised 'races') undeservingly enjoying a privileged relationship to its own object-cause. As will be elaborated in due course, the Other either appears to possess "the object-

treasure, having snatched it away from us (which is why we don't have it), or poses a threat to our possession of the object" which causes our desire (Žižek 1994: 71).

## **The Structure**

The themes and issues identified above are discussed in three parts. Part I contains two chapters. Chapter 1 looks at different conceptions of the nation and nationalism, and draws on the writings of a diverse range of thinkers including Fanon, Soyinka, Chatterjee, Renan, Anderson, Žižek, and Laclau and Mouffe. Theories covered in Chapter 1 are then contextualised in Chapter 2 when we discuss the politics of nationhood in Nigeria and Malaysia, and at the same time establish a historical horizon against which Okri's and Maniam's novels will be read in Parts II and III. We will trace the fracture lines and foreground significant moments in the history of the two countries from precolonial times to the present. As well, notions like racism, ideological interpellation and political resistance will be examined contextually from a Lacanian viewpoint.

Part II concentrates on Okri's writings and his three-pillared philosophy. It consists of three chapters. Chapter 3 looks at *The Famished Road* (TFR), the first book in the abiku trilogy. It starts off by drawing links between the trilogy and



Nigeria, Okri's country of origin. It then tries to relate this to what is arguably the most striking trope in the novel: the abiku nation and the abiku cycle of "being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals" (*TFR* 494). We will explore the hidden dimensions of suffering and the paradoxical ways in which Okri believes *jouissance* may be harnessed from suffering to resuscitate the undead nation. In connection with that, we will analyse Okri's politico-spiritual conception of predestination and agency, and the Lacanian ways in which they depart from indigenous African conceptions. We will also look at how, as *homo fabula* or "story-telling beings" (Okri 1996a: 24), human beings are said by Okri to possess an overlooked capacity to heal profound sicknesses of the spirit through fictions and stories. Through Dad, the abiku narrator's father, we will discuss Okri's Lacanian notion of the 'subject of drive', as well as the logic of 'belief before belief' by which agency is exercised and concrete political changes are wrought. As conclusion to Chapter 3, the Lacanian notion of the 'authentic act' (the revolutionary kind that 'changes everything') will be examined, as will the question of why the act must be performed if the unborn nation is to break its abiku cycle.

Within the parameters of Okri's philosophy set out in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 opens by revisiting Africa and its place in the world. Much has been said about the traumatic impact of colonialism upon the continent and its peoples. Is it possible, however, that colonialism did not penetrate the kernel of Africa, as Okri

believes? If so, what are the implications? These are but some of the issues we will be addressing in relation to *Songs of Enchantment* (SOE), the second book in the abiku trilogy. Rather than repeat the entire debate on the coloniser-colonised binary and related concepts, Chapter 4 will take it as over-familiar to the reader and proceed to ask just one question: where does Okri sit in this familiar landscape? Colonialism and its impact are clearly a big issue for Okri, as his writings attest. Yet he vehemently rejects the 'postcolonial' label. Why? What does he mean when he says that "the whole context of the margin, the periphery, postcolonial and stuff like that" are "poor descriptions of the work that some of us are trying to do" (Falconer 1997: 44)? Also on the agenda in Chapter 4 is a critique of notion of the 'African Way' foregrounded by Okri in *SOE*. We will compare the philosophy behind it with Senghor's much-maligned Negritude and attempt to come up with a reading that casts neither conception as naively or strategically essentialist. Lastly, we will evaluate Okri's ideal of the "universal civilisation" (Okri 1990) and contrast it, again, against Senghor.

Chapter 5 focuses on *Infinite Riches* (*IR*), the final book in the abiku trilogy. *IR*'s uniqueness calls for a slightly different approach (a historical one) from the one we adopt in our investigation of the first two books. *IR*, as we shall see, is not only the 'angriest' anti-colonial writing Okri has produced to date, it is also the most historically engaged and politically subversive volume in the trilogy. The novel introduces a major new character, the racist Governor-General

of the unborn African nation, who by virtue of his nefariousness eclipses everyone else in the book. In his English ways, he oppresses the people, rigs the independence elections, rewrites the continent's past and alters its present. A much longer list of the Governor-General's crimes against Africa is presented in *IR* – but why? Why is the harshest treatment accorded to this particular British administrator? Does it not somehow besmirch the good name of the actual-historical Governor-General who oversaw Nigeria's transition to independence in the late 1950s? As our argument develops, it will become clear that Okri sometimes blurs the line between fiction and historical reality – not because it is the 'postmodern' thing to do but because he appears to have something very important to reveal about Nigeria and its wounded destiny, some 'dirty secret' presently obscured by dominant accounts of the country's history.

In the second section of our discussion of *IR* in Chapter 5, we will investigate Okri's blurring of the line between fiction and reality – this time in relation to magical realism. As we know, the fictional universe in Okri's trilogy does not always follow the laws of the universe as we know them, and because Okri is most famous for his trilogy (*TFR* to be exact), he has come to be known in popular imagination as a magical realist writer of the same type as Marquez and Rushdie. Is that an accurate and fair description of what Okri tries to do in his writings? We will explore that question before finally coming to grips with Okri's



belief that “words are things” (Hattersley 1999) and “nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves” (Okri 1996a: 21).

From Okri we shift our focus to K.S. Maniam in Part III. We begin by reframing Maniam’s two novels, *The Return* (*TR*) and *In a Far Country* (*IFC*), as two thirds of a trilogy which has yet to be formally realised. Chapter 6 explains this and examines the overarching feature that unites the would-be trilogy, namely the ‘curse’ of the ‘eternal return’. Inherited by Maniam’s protagonists, the curse forever bars those afflicted with it from ever finding the rootedness they yearn. It is that which they must cancel out of existence, just as Okri’s characters must break the abiku cycle. But can it be done? Our answer is yes and the key, as we will see, lies in what we term the ‘logic of freedom’. With *TR* as the prime site of our investigation in Chapter 6, we will see that the curse of the eternal return is not just a ‘personal thing’ but has far reaching cultural and political implications too. This, as we delve into Maniam’s portrayal of *TR*’s subjects of desires (Ravi, Naina, Periathai), will be fleshed out in the context of Malaysian nationhood.

Our approach to *TR* and *IFC* is against the grain insofar as it challenges the standard reading of both texts as Maniam’s thesis on the therapeutic goodness of ‘roots’. Maniam writes about cultural, migrant, and colonial experiences. But that does not mean that he advocates cultural loyalty, as claimed by some critics. Neither does it mean he writes from the Indian migrant perspective or that he

regards all things English as degenerate. In our Lacanian critique of *IFC* in Chapter 7, the last chapter of this thesis, we will see that the text occupies a much more radical position than critics have given it credit. Instead of affirming racial stereotypes, *IFC* suspends them in order to understand anew the basis of racism in Malaysia. As well, it rethinks instead of simply accepting the commonsense understanding of such notions as culture, truth and freedom. Lastly, in Chapter 7, we will look at a new form of heroism Maniam believes must be actualised if Malaysia is to realise its radical possibilities.

As conclusion to this thesis, we will relate the lessons from Okri and Maniam to contemporary politics and the issue of responsibility in the twenty-first century.

### **About Okri and Maniam**

Ben Okri was born in 1959 in Minna, central Nigeria. He started writing creatively from his failure to get a place at a university in Nigeria. His early works were published in women's magazines and the evening papers. One of the pieces he wrote was about charlatans. It grew and grew and eventually became *Flowers and Shadows*, his first novel which he completed by the time he was eighteen years of age. In 1978 he began studying comparative literature at Essex University but had to withdraw from the course when his scholarship was



withdrawn by the cost-cutting government of Shehu Shagari, President of Nigeria's Second Republic. Okri has since published a total of fourteen books, including essays (*Birds of Heaven, A Way of Being Free*), poetry (*An African Elegy, Mental Fight*) and short stories (*Incidents at the Shrine, Stars of a New Curfew*). His novels include *Astonishing the Gods, Dangerous Love* and the latest, *In Arcadia*. Okri won the Booker Prize for *The Famished Road* in 1991. He lives in London, England.

Maniam was born in 1942 in Bendong, a town located in Kedah, Malaysia. He was raised in a hospital compound where his father worked as a launderer. For a year, he attended a Tamil school which catered mainly to children from nearby rubber estates. Maniam was subsequently transferred to an English school after he "stood up and said [he] would go to an English school or no school at all" (Maniam 1994a: 3). After completing secondary school, Maniam left for India to read medicine. There, he had a change of heart and moved to Wolverhampton, England for teacher-training. In 1970 he enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts (English) at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. After graduating in 1973, he went on to pursue a Masters degree at the same university where he later worked until retirement. Maniam's wrote poetry in the 1960s and the 1970s. 'The Eagle' (1975), a short story, was his first published work. To date, he has published three volumes of short stories (*Plot, The Aborting, Parablames and Other Stories; Arriving . . . and Other Stories; Haunting the Tiger*), a collection of plays and

short stories (*Sensuous Horizons*) and two novels (*The Return, In a Far Country*). In 2000, Maniam became the first recipient of the Raja Rao Award for outstanding contribution to the literature of South Asian diaspora (instituted by the Samvad India Foundation, co-founded by Vijay Mishra). He lives with wife and two children in Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

## **Part I**

# **NATION(S)**

I love my country, but since I love in my country  
something more than it, I mutilate it. (Salecl 1998: 79)

- 1 -

## THE NATION

### Conceptions

In the discourse of nationhood, reference is often made to the relation between the nation-state and modernity – or more precisely *European* modernity which began with the commencement of the Enlightenment project. From the eighteenth century onwards, Europe had not only evolved from the agrarian to industrial phase, it had also begun to reorder its thoughts, institutions and values through a process of formal rationalisation. As well, it had come to see itself as advanced and superior to its unenlightened medieval past. Europe's modernist urge for progress and freedom has been credited with the dismantling of feudalism and the liberation of communities from oppression. As with the nation-state, nationalism too has been ascribed as Europe's invention, the latter definable as "a product of Enlightenment rationality, insofar as it endorsed the democratic notion of popular sovereignty that treated people as citizens of a nation rather than subjects of a monarch" (Lawson 1995: 80).

In this Eurocentric scheme of things, non-European societies are deemed primitive, still “stuck on various lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder” (Crick 1997: 76), and therefore transient since it is their transhistorical destiny to become modern (Geddes 1997: 13). Their evolution towards this goal is said to have properly begun with the advent of colonialism which supplanted indigenous systems with what modernity had to offer. The implicit assumption here is that the postcolonial nation which owes its founding to colonialism is no more than a perpetual consumer of modernity (Chatterjee 1996: 216). Having selected and applied a set of the already available modular form of nationalism from Europe, the postcolonial nation need not even use its imagination to form a national community since colonial impact itself had set the inevitable in motion. Worse, postcolonial peoples are not only passive imitators, they are also inept in governing their country and practising western democracy, as is evident from the countless sociopolitical upheavals that have wrecked so many third world countries.

The “curse” (Davidson 1992) of inheriting the colonial legacy called the postcolonial nation is all too familiar to us. In Africa, as in Asia, the euphoria of decolonisation and independence had largely been succeeded by widespread disillusionment and the deepening of pre-existing antagonisms. Political elites betrayed the nation’s founding dream and the masses became bloodthirsty over race, religion and land. We need only recall the partitioning of India and Pakistan

which resulted in the death of over a million Muslims and Hindus who actively slaughtered each other over the three passions. Millions more in Sudan and Nigeria have died under similar circumstances. Malaysia, while admittedly less bloodied historically, has also had its share of spilled blood.

If, as it appears, independence is about the elite class using "its class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners" (Fanon 1990: 125), if atrocities inflicted upon the people by the invisible hands of these elites have in cases been worse than atrocities inflicted by the colonial masters they replaced, and if the betrayed masses have for most parts received mere scraps of the spoils of independence, how then does one justify the postcolonial nation's existence? Is its creation necessarily "the righting of historical oppression by peoples in-stating their own emancipation in realist national governments" (Luke 1995: 97-8)? And, as Soyinka poses, "what price a nation?" (1996: 19). If the nation only creates a fragile sense of belonging that glosses over seemingly unbridgeable differences between the disparate communities constituting the nation, would it be justified then to say that it is "a mere sentimental concept, unfounded in any practical advantages for its occupants" and "the only hard fact that confers the status of nationhood on any human collectivity [is] its right to issue passports" (Soyinka 1996: 20)? Given these circumstances, what should we say to the idea of unquestioning national unity as an absolute good? Achebe's response succinctly sums up our answer: "Quite clearly it is nonsense" (1984: 12).

## **Multinational, Ethnocultural and Imagined Communities**

Before we interrogate the issues raised above, let us first clarify the term 'nation'. Commentators have taken divergent approaches in coming to grips with the nation as a modern regime of power. For Montserrat Guibernau, a clear distinction is drawn between nation, state and nation-state. Drawing from Max Weber, she defines "state" as "a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*" (Guibernau 1996: 47-8). The "nation" is defined as "a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself." "Nation-state" on the other hand is defined as a "modern phenomenon characterised by the formation of a kind of state which has the monopoly of what it claims to be the legitimate use of force within a demarcated territory and seeks to unite the people subjected to its rule by means of homogenization, creating a common culture, symbols, values, reviving traditions and myths of origin, and sometimes inventing them."

Here it is worth noting that 'nation' and 'state' do not always exist coextensively. A state can exist without being a nation-state, and not all nations



have corresponding states (Canovan 1996: 51).<sup>4</sup> In most cases, it would be difficult to categorise definitively a country as a state, nation-state or nation. As Ernst Renan poses, why is "Switzerland, which has three languages, two religions and three or four races . . . a nation, when Tuscany, which is so homogenous, is not one?" (1993: 12). Taking into account the fact that many countries today are multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural in makeup, Kwame Gyekye in his commentary on the nation as a multinational state – that is, a complex entity representing the totality of subnations or subnationalities within the national frontiers – argues that the true goal for the nation should not be nation-building but *nation-destroying*. Ethnocultural consciousness which hinders national cohesion has to be erased before "the essence of nationhood" can be distilled (Gyekye 1997: 83). This, he underscores, is particularly applicable in Africa where the top-down imposition of the nation-state on identity-conscious indigenous communities has led to intractable problems of governance.

In contrast, eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder conceived of the nation as an organic ethnoculturally homogenous community that would be rendered unnatural and weakened should foreign races and nationalities become incorporated into the body politic. By Herder's standards, most countries today which are heterogeneous in make-up would

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Canovan cites the Soviet Union as an example of a state which was not a nation-state, and Poland (before the establishment of the Polish state following the First World War) as a nation without a state (1996: 51).



qualify as what he called “patched up contraptions, fragile machines, for they are wholly devoid of inner life” (Gyekye 1997: 78). We know, of course, that this is an inaccurate assumption. A heterogeneous citizenry is not necessarily a liability. One need only look to the United States and Australia as proof. In any case, ethnocultural homogeneity is hardly sufficient basis for nation-creation. As Renan points out, the United States and England, Latin America and Spain speak the same languages, yet they do not form single nations (Renan 1993: 16). One might also add that Indonesia and Malaysia are Muslim countries which furthermore share the same language, yet they are not one.

Herder’s conception would no doubt be rejected as racist by today’s standards. Its appeal, however, is far from diminished. In countries such as Malaysia and Nigeria, race continues to be used to mobilise support and sharpen or blur group differences for political reasons. This, despite the horrors of Nazism which caused the death of over six million Jews, and despite the often-repeated fact that race is “not a biological or genetic category with any scientific validity” (Hall 1992: 297-8) but a system of representation based on a loose and often unspecified set of differences in characteristics, “the so-called pre-discursive marks on the body (skin, hair, bone), which serve as the desiderata of race” (Seshadri-Crooks 2000: 8).

We shall have more to say about race later in our discussion. For now, let us consider the conception of a school of thought which holds that the nation is bound not so much by particulars like race, culture and ethnicity but by consciousness. This approach to nationhood can be traced to Renan who pinpoints a shared past and daily large-scale plebiscite as the nation's double cement. It also recalls Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' wherein the nation is conceived as imagined into existence with the help of two forms of imagining: the novel and the newspaper (1991: 24-5). They provide the technical means for re-presenting the nation as a limited sovereign political community, enabling millions of its members who will never meet in person to conceive of a shared nationality in homogenous empty time. In Anderson's words, they provide "a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together" (1991: 36). The notion of the nation as consciousness or a discursive formation (mediated by language and supported by print-capitalism) is not without its problems. One might query, for example, if the imagining community might not have an unconscious, an unacknowledged past that dare not speak its name. As well, one might ask if the element that binds the nation is not so much the shared goal of recovering its sense of communitarian fullness but rather a shared lie which hides the fact that the nation never had what it purports to have lost. These are some of the key questions we will be examining shortly.

## **Modernity and the Accidental Nation**

Historically, the nation as a political mode of organisation came to be because of the functional needs of Europe's industrial economy. The "only society ever to live by and rely on sustained and perpetual growth", Europe saw the world "as homogenous, subject to systematic, indiscriminate laws, and . . . open to interminable exploration" (Gellner 1988: 23). Modernity impelled the continent to expand territorially. "It supplied the momentum for the development of the European nation-state. It became the basis for the expansion of trade and the capitalist enterprise. It stimulated the application of science and promoted the idea of the individual" (Albrow 1997: 25). To be highly productive, Europe had to break free from its agrarian past, undergo a new division of labour and create a uniform school-transmitted culture to allow its workforce to communicate competently (Gellner 1988: 36). Its transition to industrialism was a period of extreme societal readjustments and modifications. It was also the age of nationalism, a phenomenon that necessitated worldwide colonial conquests to satisfy the urges of industry and trade.

Against this background, the postcolonial nation might be seen as 'inauthentic' insofar as the impetus for its own transition from the agrarian to industrial phase was not so much internally generated as it was externally imposed. It is in the first instance an accident that somehow became reified in the process of western capitalist expansion, a 'leftover' of colonialism and by

extension European modernity. To say that the postcolonial nation was created “by aliens for alien purposes” (Guibernau 1996: 117) would in fact be putting it mildly. By Bertrand Badie’s and Pierre Birnbaum’s estimation, “the state in Africa and Asia is a purely imported product, a pale imitation of the diametrically opposite European political and social systems, a foreign body which is moreover overweight, inefficient and a source of violence” (Guibernau 1996: 118). Badie and Birnbaum have unfortunately been proven correct to an extent by history. Still, the relation between colonialism, modernity and the pathology called the postcolonial nation is not as straightforward as it seems. Indian nationalists, for instance, have denounced colonialism for having corrupted the principles of modernity. In Habermasian mode, they argued that “the conditions of colonial rule necessarily limited and corrupted the application of the true principles of a modern administration” (Chatterjee 1993: 15). Their quarrel was not with modernity but colonialism and its institutions of power which were simply “not modern enough”.

But what about the ‘good’ that has come out from what Goran Therborn terms “colonial modernity” (1995)? Might it not be said that if not for colonialism (which precipitated the rapid development of colonial metropolitan centres and the incidental modernisation of the third world), modernity would not have reached its advanced, global form today? Put another way, if colonialism had brought progress to postcolonial peoples, should they not at least be appreciative

enough to accept colonialism as a necessary evil that would culminate in the realisation of a universalist ethical culture when the modernity project reaches its conclusion? This line of argument is clearly unconvincing to those who not only have little faith in the aggressive all-levelling means of the project but also in the project itself. The thesis of necessary evil may promise universal emancipation but does it not in fact privilege western purveyors of modernity and perpetuate the uneven global distribution of power for the infinity it takes to complete the project? Besides, is the representation of western modernity as the triumph of reason and superiority not based on highly selective or arbitrary interpretation of evidence which creates the truth-effect that "the non-Western world can only participate in the global by assimilating to 'Western' practices" (Holton 1998: 31)?

To concede that Europe brought modernity to the postcolonial world is not to say that it did not sneak in mechanisms that rendered the latter structurally weak. The problem, as Ali Mazrui and Michael Tidy explain, may be traced to the incongruence between "statehood" and "nationhood" in the postcolonial nation (1984). Unlike Western European countries which had the luxury of time to make the two coincide, postcolonial elites by and large had to make them overlap as much as possible within a short period of time just prior to independence. We need to recall that by the late eighteenth century western European countries had already invented 'citizens' who were generally able to subordinate self-interest to



the state. The unification of communities into a larger whole was even accepted by minority groups as a favourable move since a "small state can never bring to complete perfection within its territory the various branches of production" (Geddes 1997: 18). While Europe today has not completely closed the gap between nationhood and statehood, there is nonetheless "in virtually every European country . . . one cultural group which comprises more than half the population of the whole country, and in many cases, more than two-thirds" (Mazrui and Tidy 1984: 374).

In contrast, many African countries have been said to be too 'unnatural' to be economically and political viable. As a result of the Berlin carve-up of the continent in 1885 for economic exploitation by European powers, not only were territories simply parcelled off to colonial authorities, cultural spaces and pre-existing political-economic units were arbitrarily dissected. Of the approximately fifty thousand miles of colonial frontiers, seventy-four percent were astronomical and mathematical lines (Nugent 1996: 41). Africa's international boundaries "cut through a total of 191 culture group areas, some of which were partitioned by more than one boundary" (Griffiths 1995: 91). To compound to the problem, former French colonies were deliberately balkanised "in order to create a string of weak states that would individually be dependent on France instead of being united in strong federations able to challenge the domination of Paris in African affairs" (Mazrui and Tidy 1984: 66). Balkanisation was in fact "the essential

prerequisite of neo-colonialism in post-independent French-speaking Africa.” Inter-tribal wars, irredentism and secessionist uprisings are some of the consequences of Europe’s carve-up and balkanisation of Africa which are all too evident today.

Mazrui and Tidy’s comparison between Anglophone and Francophone African nations is useful in further explaining why former colonies face such major obstacles in their efforts at nation-building. Although British colonial policies were never evenly implemented throughout all its colonies, the ‘indirect rule’ and ‘divide and rule’ approaches to governance had made national integration extremely difficult. With their “culturally relative and ethnically specific” attitude (1984: 376), the British with the help of co-opted native authorities had encouraged, perpetuated and even invented group difference. For example, it carried out population censuses which not only extracted vital information about the colonies for administrative purposes but also “[smuggled] in numerous cultural assumptions and even [created] new social realities” (Crick 1997: 70). Furthermore, locals were encouraged to retain their indigenous roots and loyalties, and organise themselves in centrifugal clusters to protect group interests. British education policies which encouraged instruction in vernaculars for local communities did not contribute to national consciousness either. Instead they fostered pride in native languages and cultures which, together with the

above-mentioned causal factors, strengthened the foundation of statehood at the expense of nationhood.

In contrast, French colonial policy of assimilation and integration in its former colonies had contributed to a strong foundation for nationhood but compromised statehood. Mazrui and Tidy argue that by emphasising culture instead of race like Britain, France had given the “highly Gallicized black man . . . a much better chance of acceptance in French social and cultural circles than a highly Anglicized black man . . . in comparable British circles” (1984: 381). This is not to say that racism was not rife in France, only that the incentive made it easier for locals to let go of their indigenous cultures and languages and look towards France for affirmation. As well, French policies promoted a more culturally integrated group of native elites. Even at the height of nationalism, their approach to politics was to think at “the macro-level of national and continental heritages rather than at the micro-level of ethnic legacies”. This was in itself “an aid to nation-building”, according to Mazrui and Tidy (1984: 377). Furthermore, because France saw its colonies as an extension of the metropolitan motherland and sought to acculturate and assimilate third world French nationals, African elites even became active participants in French metropolitan politics. Leopold Sedar Senghor, for instance, was reputed to have had a hand in drafting the constitution of the Third Republic of France (Mazrui and Tidy 1984: 379).



Another significant factor hindering sociopolitical cohesion in former British colonies was the high rate of illiteracy which impeded the general population's assimilation of concepts of internal sovereignty and citizenship. To overcome this problem and at the same time consolidate their precarious hold on power, postcolonial ruling elites had to largely resort to varying degrees of coercion to instil order and to forge cohesion. Intrusive policies implemented to shift ethnic or regional loyalty to the nation had in many cases caused deep resentment and violent upheavals.

### **The Nation qua Impossible Thing**

It is evident that if the nation is to work at all the people must be able to at the very least feel "the sentiment of belonging to a community whose members identify with a set of symbols, beliefs and ways of life, and have the will to decide upon their common political destiny" (Guibernau 1996: 47). The persistent problem with national consciousness, however, is that "instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people", it all too often turns out to be "only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been" (Fanon 1990: 119). Nationalism has suffered such bad reputation that John Dunn even declares it "the starkest political shame" of the twentieth century, charging it of going against "the rationalist and universalist

ethical culture of modernity” which emphasises enlightened reasoning and human rights (Seth 1995: 41).

The passion for patria called nationalism is clearly Janus-faced, synonymous with emancipation on the one side and, on the other, the explosion of primordial passions, fanatical violence and the egotistical urge to dominate. This poses the question: as a point of rally, is nationalism modern or pre-modern? According to Sanjay Seth, it is “neither a premodern survival nor a part of the modern era that is simultaneously a negation of modernity” (1995: 41). Neither is it “one of the detours by which the march of modernity is only made more secure” (1995: 42). Like the modern state it serves to legitimise, nationalism is “very much part of the modern age” (1995: 41). It is “an ‘answer’ to questions relating to boundaries and identities that become pressing only in the modern era.” Sharing a similar view, Charles Taylor underscores that what is quintessentially modern about nationalism is the context of nationalist struggles, the stakes and predispositions to struggle which “could only arise in modernity” (1998: 204). Like a giant wave that threatens to engulf traditional cultures, modernity impels modernising elites to answer the “call to difference” (1998: 206). It forces them to assert national difference in the register of dignity and to refute “the imputation of inferiority against the culture they identify with.” It is this engagement with one's sense of self-worth that nationalism, according to Taylor, draws its primordial power.

To answer the call to difference is essentially to define the nation and its people by means of predicative statements. It is to capture in language what Žižek in his Lacanian critique of ideology terms the Nation-Thing. The Nation-Thing is that which makes us exclusive and unique as a nation. It appears to us “as something accessible only to us, something ‘they’, the others, cannot grasp” (1993: 201). Nationalist discourse constantly alludes to it and those who speak in the name of the nation, particularly politicians, never fail to underline its existence. Despite that, there is curiously little of substance that can be said about the Nation-Thing. All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organises its “way of life”, its

cluster of customs, opinions and prejudices that include dietary practices, the sequestration or near-sequestration of [our] women, the sermons delivered by [our] mullah of choice, a loathing of modern society in general, riddled as it is with music, godlessness and sex, and a more particularised loathing (and fear) of the prospect that [our] own immediate surroundings could be taken over – ‘westoxicated’ – by the liberal, western-style way of life. (Rushdie 2001)

Although we regard our national Thing as rightfully ours, it is also paradoxically something we must constantly re-find. There are for instance always more colonial chains to unshackle from our once-colonised minds, the original grandeur of our culture to restore, and/or the surplus population of our

country to be put in their proper place. All conditions must be met before we, the nation, can arrive at our rightful state of communitarian fullness. What this amounts to saying is that the Nation-Thing an impossible object. We claim it is ours but it can never fully be in our possession since there will always be

just one more matter to attend to, just one more precondition to fulfill . . . just one more account to settle. And with this just one more and one more and one more arises the structure of postponement and indirect living that keeps the system of excessive production going. The latter, of course, always knows how to present itself as an unconditionally 'good end' that deludes us with its light as though it were a real goal but that whenever we approach it recedes once more into the distance. (Sloterdijk 1987: 194)

The Nation-Thing is always-already lost, "found at the most as something missed. One does not find it, but only its pleasurable associations" (Lacan 1992: 52). We derive enjoyment from its absent presence, in heightened anticipation of its return and the national 'completion' it promises to bring home. The truth that we never had what we purport to have lost is simply overlooked. No one wants to know the truth because it is unbearable, which perhaps explains why we rarely hear of anyone rallying for political support by reiterating to the masses that their celebrated national Thing does not exist or that it exists only as the effect of their belief in its existence, and that the function of its existence is to conceal and at the



same time embody the nation's (and by implication the people's) lack of original meaning. As Žižek explains, a nation "*exists* only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices" (1993: 202).

Žižek argues that because the national Thing forever eludes predication, nationalist discourse must construct an Other, outsiders to whom we can impute "an excessive enjoyment" (1993: 203). These intruders want to steal our enjoyment and keep it for themselves. They want to ruin our way of life and reduce us to their level of depravity. 'They' can be just about anybody. Jews, for instance, are always vilified as hungering for the destruction of the Islamic Thing. Shifty aggressive Chinese in Malaysia are choking the life out of inert Malays, lazy immigrants are stealing all our jobs and the syphilitic west, arguably the Mother of all Others, is defiling our purity. Blaming the Other is a politically expedient thing to do. It is also a good excuse to not confront the fact that, all too often, "the disease that is in us, is from us" (Rushdie 2001). Moreover – and we usually count ourselves out in this regard – when we fantasise about the Other enjoying itself at our expense, not only do we feel tortured, we even, to our horror, enjoy ourselves. As explained in the Introduction, enjoyment (*jouissance*) is not 'pleasure' in the everyday sense of the term. It rather designates that which "emerges when the very reality that is the source of unpleasure, of pain, is experienced as a source of traumatic-excessive pleasure" (Žižek 1997b: 24). For

example, a person might commit adultery, experience terrible guilt, and yet find this feeling of guilt intensifying the enjoyment of sinning (1994: 175). Similarly, the fantasy of how ‘they’ want to ‘swamp’ our country and steal our precious national Thing might disgust a racist. Underneath it all, however, it is always possible that the racist is ‘tickled’ by the thought of the wretched outsiders worshipping-craving his Thing. (Being tickled is after all intensely torturous and yet perversely enjoyable.) Through the Other, the racist gets to recognise (again) the joy of the national Thing which must now be defended even more strenuously.

Žižek’s nation of enjoyment bears fundamental similarities with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of the “impossible society” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). For Laclau and Mouffe, modern society (or nation, in our usage) is structured around a traumatic kernel (the Nation-Thing in Žižek, the Lacanian Real which lies outside the symbolic order) which cannot be mastered but which nevertheless functions as its unifying locus. This locus was in the past “embodied in the person of the prince and tied to a transcendental authority” (Mouffe 1993b: 11). Today modern democratic society still turns around the same centre – except that the prince has been evacuated and the seat of power is empty. No individual or group can permanently occupy the place left vacant by the prince because national elections allow for periodical redistribution of power and controlled contest (Torfing 1999: 192). At any one time there is always a plurality of nationalist discourses competing with each other for hegemony. Every emerging



discourse must offer a credible and compelling imaginary framework through which society's 'irrationalities' may be made sense of. Additionally, it "must aim to position itself not just as one alternative among many, but as the only possible framework for the resolution" of society's crisis (Smith 1998a: 167).

For Laclau and Mouffe, as for Žižek, hegemonic discourse has no transcendental authority which predetermines its success. Nothing – neither object nor event – possesses an objectivity that we must re-find. An earthquake and the falling of a brick may be natural phenomena or expressions of God's wrath (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 108). Similarly, an anti-government street-protest may be constructed as proof of populist democracy, anti-democratic hooliganism, the Jewish conspiracy, and so forth. An event as such functions as a "floating signifier" that bears neither "absolute non-fixity" nor "absolute fixity" of meaning (1985: 111). It has no objective necessity to signify anything in particular although it may be sutured to any number of signifieds.

The extent to which discourse becomes dominant in the national imagination is substantially dependent upon the prevailing horizon of intelligibility or interpretative framework which delineates "what is possible, what can be said and done, what positions may legitimately be taken, what actions may be engaged in, and so forth" (Smith 1998a: 64). As well, it hinges on the effectiveness of particular political struggles to recompose that framework. When

one discourse prevails over the others, it will begin to depoliticise itself (suppress its political character, the fact that its institution is a *political* act par excellence) and rule out alternative frameworks for identification as “increasing illegitimate, immoral, irrational and finally incoherent” (1998a: 171). Because hegemonic discourse is a usurper of the place of the prince, its hold on power can never be total. Alternative discourses can always be articulated in radicalised forms in counter-hegemonic struggles. By the same logic, society in Laclau and Mouffe’s conception has no objective principle that holds it together as a field of differences. It has neither endogenous meaning nor internal necessity to constitute itself this way or that, or to assume this or that form. The implication of this, Laclau stresses, is not that ‘everything is discourse’ or that one discourse is as likely to gain currency as the other. The point rather is that “no guarantee of the permanence of a certain hegemonic arrangement is obtainable *outside the hegemonic struggle itself*” (Laclau, in Bowman 1999: 100).

For Laclau and Mouffe, antagonisms arising from hegemonic struggles are simultaneously the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility for a ‘free society’, that is, a society from which antagonisms have been entirely eliminated. The logic is Lacanian at heart. When the Lacanian subject arrives at his ‘final destination’ after removing all the external blockages, what he will find is not the anticipated fullness of being but its radical opposite. He will discover that he is a signifier without a natural signified, that he has meaning only insofar

as he misrecognises his originary meaningless. Similarly, when society in Laclau and Mouffe's conception eliminates the Other it denigrates as the stain on its perfection, what it will find is not its crystallisation as a homogenous, harmonious totality but rather its dissolution (in the sense of becoming totalitarian). Society is, in this precise sense, impossible. Antagonisms must be eliminated before society can constitute itself as a unitary One. Yet the realisation of an antagonism-free and full-constituted society can only result in its radical negation since, without an outlet for the heterogeneous communities to air and redress their problems, there can be no free society in the true sense of the word.

In underlining the non-eradicable character of antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe are not saying that we should abandon the pursuit of the good society, embrace nihilism, aim for the total elimination of power, and/or accept all differences in political opinion as a positive good. Their point rather is that society, with all its local conditions and historical peculiarities, exists only "in the pragmatic – and as a consequence always incomplete – movements of its affirmation" (Laclau 1990: 183). It is "the product of hegemonic and contingent – and as such, always reversible – articulations and *not* . . . the result of immanent laws of history" (emphasis added, 1990: 189). Nothing is granted as a destiny since destiny is ultimately predestined by the agent himself.

- 2 -

## **TWO NATIONS**

### **Nigeria, Malaysia**

Drawing on the insights of thinkers such as Chatterjee, Anderson, Žižek, and Laclau and Mouffe, we have in the preceding chapter examined some key issues in contemporary debates on nationhood. We have considered the nation as a by-product of modernity, a collective imagination, and an impossible Thing. In this chapter, these theories will be contextualised as we examine the discourse of nationhood in Nigeria and Malaysia and at the same time establish a historical horizon against which Okri's and Maniam's novels will be read in subsequent chapters.



# Nigeria

## Hell on Earth

There is a joke about Nigeria which begins with a Nigerian who died and went to hell. There, he met and befriended an American and a Briton. They conferred and agreed that they should telephone their loved ones on earth to warn them that hell was real. They negotiated with Satan and agreed that each of them would pay the dollar equivalent of their telephone calls. After the calls were made, the American was billed twenty dollars and the Briton twenty-five dollars. The Nigerian's bill amounted to thirty-five cents. The American and the Briton immediately protested, demanding to know why the Nigerian got a discount. "There is no preferential treatment," said Satan. "The Nigerian only made a local call."<sup>5</sup>

Nigeria, as the joke implies, is not very far from where hell is located. Indeed the proximity between the two has earned the world's largest black nation a string of appellations: a crippled giant (Osaghae 1998), an open sore (Soyinka 1996), a mere geographical expression (Chief Awolowo, in Morris-Hale 1996), a mistake (Sardauna of Sokoto, in Kirk-Greene 1968), a pariah nation (Obasanjo 1999) and one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Rudolph Okonkwo's web-article 'Nigeria, A Deferred Dream' (1999).

(Achebe 1984: 9). Unflattering as they are, and despite the fact that Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 has been an encouraging step in the right direction, these labels are not wholly unjustified. Intellectuals have been stifled, persecuted and driven into exile by repressive ruling regimes. Corruption runs rampant and officials loot the national coffers with abandon. The country has furthermore been put through a succession of military coups and counter-coups, intertribal clashes, daylight assassinations of political leaders, judicial murders and state-sponsored executions. On top of that, the economy of the oil-rich country is in a state of disrepair.

It is hard to imagine that Nigeria, with a landmass nearly three times the size of Malaysia and a population five times greater, was once economically on par with Malaysia. In the 1960s it was even tipped to emerge as an "African tiger" (Osaghae 1998: 15) in the same way that certain Asian countries have transformed into powerful economic dragons. Today Nigeria languishes at the bottom end of the World Bank's Gross National Product (GNP) ranking, reduced to

a sharply divided country with a divided and highly politicised army, a poor beggar country, yet underdeveloped and home to a large number of brigands, fraudsters and murderers in position of power and influence. (Justice Akinola Aguda, in Abiandu, Djebah, and Adeniyi 1999)



Nigeria has also been described as the “only country in the world where the best is impossible and the worst never happens” (Okonkwo 1999), a country guided by “a mysterious spirit which usually rescues it from the brink of self-inflicted disintegration” (Williams 1998b: 8). National disintegration is self-inflicted because those who wreak violence upon the Other (tribal, military, political, and so forth) often elicit reactions that have historically proven to be “more intense and graver than action, real or imagined” (Obasanjo 1981: 159-160). As Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo puts it, “the sowers of wind are usually also the reapers of whirlwind.”

### **North, South, East, West**

So why has Nigeria failed to “astonish the world with its will and capacities” (Okri 1994a)? How it is possible that “a nation favoured by Providence” (Achebe 1984: 9) with an abundance of natural resources and the best of talents could be so destitute after more than four decades of independence? In William Graf’s contention, breakdowns in Nigeria’s political system have “always occurred within the context of inter-ethnic controversy” (1988: 13). Larry Diamond concurs, arguing that “nothing can be understood about Nigeria until its pattern of ethnic diversity is delineated” (1988: 21). Eghosa Osaghae too places a similar accent on ethnicity, adding that “for most Africans, the ethnic community is the only real entity worth dying for” (1991: 53).

Nigeria is ethnically divided between the Hausa-Fulani in the North and two ethnic majorities in the South: Yoruba in the southwest and Igbo in the southeast. The problem, as Okri summarises it, is as follows: "the southerners fear the eternal domination of the north. The northerners fear the secret domination of the south; they also fear the south's vengeance" (1994a). Nigeria is not the only country bedevilled by interethnic unrest. Nonetheless its situation is unique. Like few other countries in the world, it has to create a nation out of an estimated two-hundred and fifty to six-hundred and nineteen ethno-linguistic groups living within its borders (Nnoli 1995; Levin 1997). To grasp the breadth of Nigeria's challenge, it would be instructive to recall that the Hausa-Fulani-dominated North has been an Islamist enclave since the fifteenth century. Consisting mainly of savanna scrubland and broad-stepped plateau, it has, by virtue of proximity to the Sahara trade routes, been influenced predominantly by the Muslim-Sudanic culture. Society is conservative, hierarchized and ruled by Islamist principles which political elites have used to forge trans-tribal Muslim solidarity and to "inculcate habits and attitudes of political deference and subordination" (Coleman 1958: 39). In contrast, the South is less stratified and was considered "more receptive to the kind of social change needed for integration into the colonial-capitalist economy and society" (Graf 1988: 15). Geographically, it is largely made up of coastal rain forests and swampy plains. These natural barriers have historically inhibited intermingling between tribes, which explains the large number of small and isolated communities living in southern Nigeria. They have

also served to impede the spread of Islam from the North. Its proximity to the coast, however, had facilitated an early contact with Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, resulting in its intensive evangelisation. Today Christianity is still preponderant in the South, especially Igboland in the southeast. Yorubaland has an almost even number of Christians and Muslims.

While the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo dominate numerically in their respective regions, hundreds of ethnic minorities make up more than a third of Nigeria's population. The largest of the minorities (Edo, Tiv, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio and Idoma) collectively make up twenty-six percent of the total population. The smaller ethnic groups consist of between one thousand and one million members each. Many of them have a history of pre-colonial inter-kingdom warfare. The ancient kingdoms of Yoruba and Kanuri, for instance, had had to fight off the Fulani empire's hostile expansionism from the North (Diamond 1988: 21-2; Coleman 1958: 23).

Whatever animosities that might have existed then were exacerbated by colonialism which formally began with the annexation of Lagos as Britain's colony in 1861. The ostensible aim of the British then was to "exercise an influence on the surrounding tribes which may, it [was] hoped, be permanently beneficial to the African race" and "to secure forever the free population of Lagos from the slave-traders and kidnappers who formerly oppressed them" (Crowder



1973: 169). Over time, Britain extended its piecemeal conquest to the entire Niger Basin. Territories were amalgamated and in 1914, the North, South and Lagos became Nigeria under the watchful eyes of Sir Frederick Lugard (then Governor of the British Protectorates and a renowned racist, as we shall see in Chapter 5).

Even after Nigeria's creation, the North and the South continued to be administered under separate systems. That, needless to say, did not contribute to social cohesion between the two sides which already saw one another as aliens rather than fellow countrymen. The situation was also not helped by the division of the Southern provinces into Western and Eastern Regions in 1939, and the absence of a unitary constitution until as late as 1947 (Kirk-Greene 1971: 8; Diamond 1988: 28). The Richards Constitution was supposed to promote unity when it was introduced in 1947 but it ended up doing the exact opposite. While it created a central government comprising representatives from all regions, it also strengthened the foundation of ethnoregionalism in Nigerian politics. It made the regions nearly autonomous and the centre weak, causing regional and ethnic loyalties to take precedence over national interests.

Many attempts have since been made to redress the problem of federal-regional imbalance, including the creation of more states. None, however, have been politics-free, for even "decisions on which states were to be created reflected the prevailing power equation at the time of the exercise" (Nwosu 1995: 1).

J.A.A. Ayoade (1997) notes that the North invariably ends up with more states than the South with each state-recreation exercise. Ten states were created in the North and nine in the South when General Murtala Muhammed was in power. Under the Babangida regime, there were eleven in the North and nine in the South, later revised to sixteen and fourteen respectively. The North had the upper-hand again in 1996 when General Sani Abacha gave nineteen states to the North and seventeen to the South.

### **Insecurity Dilemma**

Southern fear of Northern domination is not unfounded even though leaders from the North have 'denied' harbouring any such ambition. "All of us need one another", says Alhaji Maitama Sule, a Northern leader. He adds that

Every one has a gift from God. The Northerners are endowed by God with leadership qualities. The Yoruba man knows how to earn a living and has diplomatic qualities. The Igbo is gifted in commerce, trade and technological innovation. God so created us individually for a purpose and with different gifts. (Ayoade 1997: 14)

According to Maitama Sule, Nigeria "will definitely become a great nation, a great influence in the world" if each group were to keep to their place

(Ayoade 1997: 14). What Alhaji is effectively saying is that Northern hegemony is justified within his holy scheme of things, not because Northerners covet power but because they were simply created by God to rule. Alhaji's "barefoot philosophy" (Ayoade 1997: 14) bears an uncanny resemblance to the logic of Malay domination in Malaysia. Abdullah Ahmad, a politician from Barisan Nasional (the ruling coalition) insists that Malays only want to assert their legally non-challengeable birthright to be "politically dominant" in Malaysia. That, he reasons, is not to the same as "political domination" over minority ethnic groups (Das 1987). He further says that that is how things are and must continue to be because Malays would rather share poverty with Indonesia than see their political position eroded by non-Malays.

As we are well aware, the fear and loathing of the Other need not arise from a real threat. Sometimes the mere fact that there is group distinction is in itself sufficient to cause intergroup animosity (Tyrell 1996: 243). In an unstable country, one group's demand for what it regards as equitable treatment (on grounds of real and/or imagined wrongs it has suffered) is likely to heighten fear in other groups whose sense of security is already threatened. In Nigeria, the mutual fear and suspicion between ethnic groups very often turn into violent confrontations that are disproportionately excessive in relation to their cause. For instance, in 1987, a small argument broke out between Christians and Muslims at the College of Education (Kafanchan, Nigeria) over a Christian group's



interpretation of the Quran at a conference. It led to a Muslim assault on Christians which then spilled over to other places including the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. As ripple effect, churches, mosques and other properties in Kaduna and Katsina were destroyed. In the final count, thirty churches and three mosques were razed, "as well as 46 private houses, 19 vehicles, 30 hotels, 9 shops, workshops and offices [and] 1 petrol station" (Nwosu 1996b: 145). As if to underline the tragic excess of the clashes, a total of nine dead cows were included on the casualty list.

The tragedy of such eruptions is that sometimes the participants do not actually set out to cause others harm. Alan Collins explains that, in a security dilemma, "uncertainty [about the other's intent] can lead to the pursuit of actions which are paradoxical because they make matters worse" (1998: 263). He argues that mitigation and ultimately escape from an ethnic security dilemma lie in power-sharing and ethnic reconstruction. Power-sharing could take the form of a coalition regime, while ethnic reconstruction could involve non-assimilatory identification with a 'neutral' concept like *Bangsa Malaysia* (the Malaysian people transcending race and religion). Collins' proposal is admittedly alluring. Theoretically, at least, power-sharing and benevolent ethnic reconstruction do seem like viable options. The problem is that solutions are often problems that require new solutions. A solution may turn into a problem when there are conflicting views on what constitutes neutrality where the construction of

'national race' is concerned, or how power ought to be aggregated between competing groups.

Nigeria's perennial census crisis is an example of how solution and problem often coincide. Attempts at counting Nigeria's population have always been rife with controversy because of the enormous implications of census results on the country's balance of power. Because revenue, resources and federal parliamentary seats are allocated in proportion to ethnoregional population size, numerical superiority literally translates into control of the country. So important are numbers, in fact, that the dead, the unborn, the nonexistent and livestock were said to have been counted to inflate census figures (Osaghae 1998: 41; Okafor 1998: 33).

From the South's perspective, the census exercises of 1962 and 1963 were an opportunity to remove the numerical basis for Northern domination. More precisely, it was to undo Britain's colonial engineering which grossly inflated figures from the 1952-53 census in favour of the North (Diamond 1988: 131). The 1962-3 plan failed and the North was again declared officially more populous. Howls of protests came loudest from Eastern Premier Michael Okpara who rejected the "worse than useless" census outcome, claiming that the Northern count was "riddled with flagrant malpractices" (Diamond 1988: 138). Legal attempts to nullify the results failed and the case was subsequently closed.

Meanwhile, North-South relation continued to fester. By the decade's end, it erupted into a series of military coups, counter-coups and a bitter civil war which claimed over a million lives and dispossessed an estimated two to three million (Osaghae 1998: 69).

### **Racism and the Spectral Menace**

As we have seen, a security dilemma is akin to self-fulfilling prophecy: 'I fear the worst and try to avoid it. But in avoiding it I inadvertently set in motion a chain of events that culminates in the realisation of what I most fear.' Collins suggests that a way out of this dilemma is by mitigating "information failure" between the parties (1998: 269). "In the case of power-sharing, if ethnic elites adhere to an agreement where each group has influence over government policy then their uncertainty about the intent that lies behind that policy is, at worst, minimized, and at best, removed." At the one level, this form of communication occurs every day. If not perfect, it is at least effective enough to allow for pragmatic social interactions. The problem, however, is that intersubjective communication is often more problematic than we are fully aware. We are constantly faced with the persistent gap between utterance ('You're telling me this . . .') and its enunciation ('. . . but what exactly are you aiming at? What do you want from me?') (Žižek 1989: 111). We mistake signs for wonders, reading into every utterance some hidden, profound meaning and undreamt-of-depth. And we interpret "contingent

accidents as meaningful 'answers of the real' – that is, as confirmations of [our] paranoiac forebodings" (1994: 42). Žižek's example of the anti-Semite German and Mr Stern, his Jewish neighbour, is useful in illustrating the point we are making. The German, instead of giving up his racist belief when presented with evidence of Mr Stern's normality (that is, his failure to act like the schemer and wire-puller that all Jews are supposed to be), perversely inverts it into the support of his anti-Semitism: "You see how dangerous they really are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. They hide it behind the mask of everyday appearance – and it is exactly this hiding of one's nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of the Jewish nature" (1989: 49).

By the same logic, an apparently neutral political discourse can be compelling not just for "what it explicitly says, but also because of its concealed responses to our unspeakable desires" (Smith 1998a: 75). A hypothetical Yoruba man might support Nigeria's 'three Rs' plan which was introduced after the civil war (or Northern-led genocide of Igbos, as some view it) to reconstruct, rehabilitate and reconcile the country. Publicly, he might declare that there is no victor or vanquished in a war of brothers (to paraphrase the official line of the Gowon regime which initiated the plan) and that although Easterners should not have attempted to secede from the federation and bring chaos to the country in doing so, the war is over and everyone should now put the past behind and work towards the preservation of Nigeria's territorial integrity. Secretly, however, is it

not possible that the hypothetical subject might have been motivated by tribalist resentment and envy at the Igbo East for daring to seek enjoyment-existence as a separate, sovereign entity (an ambition that he perhaps harbours for Western Nigeria)? Perhaps he feels that by placating and simultaneously locking Easterners within the federation, they would be assured of never having access to the coveted Thing that he too is deprived of.

“Scratch the surface of culture and ethnicity and race will appear underneath it all to found its essence.” That, as succinctly put by Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks, is why race never dies even though we know very well it does not exist (2000: 4). Race is everywhere. It is the fantasmatic Thing implicitly referred to in multiculturalist discourse, the presupposed specificity of self-enclosed Others whose difference we ought to respect – albeit from a distance, as if we are entirely different from them and better off for it. The underlying claim of racially-deterministic discourse is always the same: we are our race, born as fixed racial actors with naturally pre-established religion, goals and often immutable arch-enemies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James Coleman notes that it was not uncommon for members of smaller tribes living in the Middle Belt to change their tribal identity by voluntarily identifying with the prestigious Hausa for the status it conferred (1958: 22). Similarly, Okwudiba Nnoli's study shows that communities living in isolated and difficult terrain in Nigeria are sometimes mistaken as homogenous because their surrounding environment occludes differences and reveals superficial similarities (1995). Communities can also acquire a new identity through no fault of theirs, as was the Epi's fate when they found themselves classified as Ijaw (instead of under the umbrella of Edo) following administrative changes (1995: 27).



In order to work, racial essentialism must paper over the irreconcilable gap between subject position and structural position. It must cover up the fact that 'who we are' is not naturally predetermined by our race, class, sex and so forth. A male Hausa Fulani can always view the world from any number of fantasmatic frameworks: radical pan-Africanist, right-wing socialist, anti-Igbo nationalist, a self-hating racist, etc. Should he experience his commitment to an ideological cause from, say, a pan-Africanist perspective, it would be unlikely for him to support the marginalisation of his 'natural' enemy, namely Southerners. Similarly, there is no Celestial Decree which says that a person who identifies himself as Malay must view the Chinese in Malaysia as a natural enemy or sexually-fecund pug-nosed dragon out to devour his/her race, as described by prominent Malay writer Shahnnon Ahmad in his novel *Menteri* ('Minister') (1967).

Race identity, writes Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks, "is about the sense of one's exclusiveness, exceptionality and uniqueness. Put very simply, it is an identity that, if it is working at all, can only be about pride, being better, being the best. Race is inextricably caught up in a Hobbesian discourse of social contract, where personal (or particular) interest masquerades as public good" (Sheshadri-Crooks 2000: 7). For these reason, a racist is often impervious to rational arguments. He can usually enumerate a series of empirical features that causes his muddled feelings of anxiety and repulsion towards the Other: their pathetic mimicry of our ways, the pagan rites and rituals to which they enslave

themselves, the way they always gather amongst their suspicious kind and get up to no good, and so on. Proving 'algorithmically' to a racist that racism is heinous is not likely to change his mind about being a racist. The reason for this, Žižek argues, lies in the fact that the racist 'enjoys' being one. He would rather suffer his irritating symptom (embodied by the racial Other) than give it up and lose the enjoyment he derives from it (1989: 74)

It should be emphasised here that the Other's 'bad' attributes which a racist uses to reinforce his racist beliefs are not external to himself. Also, they need not be 'real' before the racist can feed on them. To elucidate this, let us first cite Melanie Klein's theory of identification. According to Klein, a child in early stages of psychic development learns to deal with good and bad experiences of the external world by splitting his ego in two. One part of the infantile self is identified with the good object and the other with the bad (Rustin 1991: 64). It then evolves through these identifications. The boundary between self and other is highly volatile and porous (porosity generally decreases as the child matures). In moments of introjective identification, he may take the attributes of others into himself, while in projective identification, he gets rid of unwanted feelings by attributing them to others. Furthermore,

Others are sometimes perceived as possessing qualities which in reality belong to the self; the self is sometimes experienced as

possessing qualities put into [him] by others (if bad qualities) or stolen from them (if good ones). (Rustin 1991: 64)

In a relation of countertransference, others may sometimes unconsciously take on fantasmatic roles which in part derive from the subject's projection onto them (Rustin 1991: 65). In doing so, they would inadvertently 'confirm' the subject's reality and receive further projections. This theory is well-known in the field of educational psychology. A teacher's low expectations of a student will not only shape his pedagogic approach, it may also hail the latter into acting out the role unconsciously assigned to him, causing him to under-perform academically. In the same way, a racist will, by way of dealing with his inner conflict, partake in irrational projections. Parts of himself which he finds repellent or inferior will be projected onto the racial Other so that he may perceive himself as good. The Other is then blamed for trying to corrupt and weaken the racist's 'good' self – hence the need to keep him at bay or, more drastically, exterminate him.

Here we should be careful not to essentialise the racist and his victim(s) as possessing fixed properties or attributes which become distorted in intersubjective communication. As well, we should avoid misreading projection as resolution of the racist's inner conflict. Žižek explains that racist hatred is “not limited to the ‘actual properties’ of its object but targets its real kernel, *objet a*, what is ‘in the object more than itself’” (1996a: 107). The racist may enumerate the Other's



annoying features but these features only “function as indicators of a more radical strangeness.” *Objet a* is this radical strangeness, the spectral surplus “that stands for what in the perceived positive, empirical object necessarily eludes my gaze and as such serves as the driving force of my desiring it” (1996a: 105). *Objet a* intrigues and irritates the racist who cannot quite grasp this no-Thing which keeps manifesting his fantasies from within. The closer he gets to the spectral menace, the more threatened he feels and the more he needs to negate it. This the racist achieves by inflicting pain on the Other. The Other's pain enables the racist to experience *jouissance* because it serves as evidence that the spectre he perceives is not an illusion but really does exist in the Other (not just as symbolic fiction but in the Real). When a racist strikes at his victim, what he is really trying to do is strike at the spectre, forcing it to 'materialise' through the victim's pain. The racist's aim is as such comparable to a sadist's: “by means of my victim's pain, I make the Other exist” (1996a: 105).

### **On Power and Ideology**

As we noted earlier, Nigeria tends to experience pain in epic proportions. More often than not, pain comes directly from above, namely the ruling elite (a prime target in Okri's novels, as we shall see in later chapters). The African slave trade would not have been so successful if not for the local rulers who readily “brought . . . slaves to shipside in exchange for European trinkets” (Coleman 1958: 40).

Similarly, colonialism would not have reached its depth of penetration without local elite support of British expansionism.<sup>7</sup> As well, post-independence military dictators were so oppressive towards the people that Nigeria was once ostracised from the international community. Between 1984 and 1999 alone, military regimes promulgated no less than fifty-six decrees that flagrantly violated basic human rights (Aina 1999: 26).

If there had been any doubt about Nigerian ruling elites' propensity for destruction, it would have been dispelled by General Sani Abacha who came into power after the annulment of the 1993 election result. Abacha's ruthlessness was "unique even by Nigeria's standards of brutal military dictatorship" (Williams 1998b: 8). Even before seizing power, the "first real dictator Nigeria has known" (Synge 1998: 14) had ordered soldiers to mow down at least four hundred unarmed demonstrators protesting against the election annulment. His other, more illustrious, victims include Ken Saro-Wiwa and Kudirat Abiola (wife of the 1993 President-elect Basarun Abiola who was gunned down in broad daylight in Lagos by Abacha's killer squad). The day Abacha died suddenly of a cardiac arrest (ending his five-year rule which Nigerians call the 'years of the locust'), his death

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Isichei quotes an essay written by Aminu Kano on Northern leaders and the British: "The emirs are not concerned with anybody or whatever may befall anybody, so long as they are fulfilling the commands of the Europeans. And the European, for his part, out of sheer hypocrisy stands aloof and overlooks and pretends that he does not know what crimes have been committed in the course of doing his bidding. He seems to believe that so long as no one screams aloud, no one is suffering." (1983: 381).



was celebrated with such morbid jubilation that the people were reported to have taken to the streets with a mock coffin, singing anti-Abacha songs.

After all that the Nigeria has been through, it would not be surprising if the people should regard the political class as a “desperate and incorrigible lot, a collective of veteran delinquents” (Williams 1998b: 9). The trouble with Nigeria, as Achebe writes, is “simply and squarely a failure of leadership . . . the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility” (1984: 1). Leaders lack the executive foresight and intellectual rigour which made Julius K. Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah respected personalities. What they do possess, however, is “Nigerian-style leadership”, namely “a tendency to pious materialistic wooliness and self-centred pedestrianism” (1984: 11). Achebe makes an example of Obafemi Awolowo, a former leader from Western Nigeria who was quoted to have said:

I was going to make myself formidable intellectually, morally invulnerable, to make all the money that is possible for a man with my brains and brawn to make in Nigeria. (Achebe 1984:11)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s The Coker Commission found Awolowo guilty of misusing Western regional funds. He was indicted for having diverted public funds totalling N4.4 million in cash and N1.3 million in overdraft to finance the Action Group (the then dominant Western political party) (Osaghae 1998: 40).

In the past, elites had relied mostly on superstition, charisma and/or brute force to elicit obedience from the masses. Feudal rulers in Nigeria, like Malay *rajas* who intimidated their subjects with threats of punishment by magical powers (Milner 1995: 15), were known to have done the same from behind a phenomenal veil. The Oba of Benin, for example, would not cross a river for fear of exploding the myth of royal invincibility should he fall in and drown. The Aku Uka of Wukari made himself absolute and supreme by only eating food prepared by men, while the Mai of Bornu maintained the aura of divinity by always speaking to his subjects from behind a holy curtain (Ayoade 1997: 5). In instances such as these, the ruler's magical exterior "implies that there is something behind it which appears through it", that "it simultaneously hides and reveals the essence behind its curtain" (Žižek 1989: 193). What is really hidden is "the fact that there is nothing to hide" since what "is concealed is that the very act of concealing conceals nothing". Behind the feudal ruler's phenomenal veil, there was not a more substantial reality but literally *nothing* whose existence nevertheless had to be presupposed if the ruler's claim to power was to attain legitimacy.

Today, although we no longer naively believe in the politician's rhetoric, we still sometimes act as if we believe, as if we are practical solipsists rehearsing the formula of fetishistic disavowal. We know very well, for instance, that the Prime Minister is a usurper of the place of the prince, someone who perverts the country's enshrined constitution in the name of his race for his own pathological

purposes, yet we still act as if his regime is legitimate. We still carry on with our daily lives (pay taxes, read regime-controlled newspapers, apply for this or that permit and licence from the authorities) as if all is well. That, according to Žižek, is precisely how ideology functions. It succeeds because of how we *act*, regardless of what we know or might have to say about it. Ideology is in this precise sense

not simply a 'false consciousness', an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as 'ideological' – *'ideological' is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence* – that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals 'do not know what they are doing'. *'Ideological' is not the 'false consciousness' of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by 'false consciousness.'* (1989: 21)

Political elites in Nigeria have done some heinous things, as have non-elites who, according to Osaghae, know very well that ethnic ideology can be put to their service (Osaghae 1991: 54). They use it to scale social hierarchies and access the spoils of elitism: "wealth, reputation, influence, connections with, and control of, government and its agencies" (1991: 43, 54). The intimacy between elites and non-elites is well reflected in prebendal politics, described by Richard Joseph as "patterns of political behaviour which rest on the justifying principle

that [political] offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as for their reference or support group” (Joseph 1987: 8). It is not uncommon in Nigeria for the public purpose of an office to become a secondary concern once it has been won, “however much that purpose might have been originally cited in its creation or during the periodic competition to fill it” (1987: 8).

Prebendalism is almost always mentioned in the same breath with another national bane – clientelism or patron-client instrumental friendship in which “an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron” (Joseph 1987: 57). As a system of reward, prebendalism and clientelism feed on intergroup rivalry. The more insecure a group feels, the more it tends to subscribe to the system. Opting out of it entirely is an option, but it would not be easy since refusal to ‘play along’ effectively means forgoing the “loans, scholarships, licences, plots of urban land, employment, promotion” that usually come from being under the protection of an *oga* (‘godfather’) (Joseph 1987: 56). Furthermore, the repercussions are not only the individual's to face, they also affect his kinsmen or dependants because one's personal fate is considerably dependent upon the political fortune of the group(s)



to which one is affiliated. In our discussion on Okri in Part II, we will see how ruinous it can be to have the wrong affiliations.

## **From Independence to War**

By 1951, Nigeria was already “firmly and clearly established on the road to independence” (Hatch 1971: 215). All nationalists had to do was “display sufficient power and national unity to compel a commitment” from Britain (Coleman 1958: 396). Their struggle for freedom was “less a matter of defying foreign authority” and more

a matter of drawing boundaries, founding capitals, and distributing power in such a way as to dampen and contain sharpening ethno-regional hostilities prior to the disappearance of authority. It was marked not so much by growing insurgency in order to force the British to leave as by feverish negotiation, in both Lagos and London, in order to create a *modus vivendi* among the Yoruba, Ibo, and Hausa-Fulani so that they could leave. (Rudolph 1971: 270)

The required show of unity was nonetheless a tall order, considering the antagonistic nationhood ideals of the three ethnoregional blocs and the communal character of the dominant political parties in each region. In retrospect, it seems extraordinary that any consensus was reached at all. The North – headed by the Northern People's Congress (NPC) – was from the outset averse to Southern



demands for early self-government. To the bitter resentment of Western and Eastern leaders – respectively from the Action Group (AG) and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC)<sup>9</sup> – the North had, in 1953, rejected the original target of 1956 for self-rule and threatened to secede if things were to proceed. Fearing Southern domination, NPC demanded that the date be left indefinite so that it could first catch up with Southern progress. Frustrated AG and NCNC members reacted by staging a parliamentary walk-out, leaving spectators to jeer at NPC politicians. The Southern press began criticising Northern leaders in stinging terms, labelling them imperialist stooges and thieving kolanut chiefs without minds of their own. The Northerners were highly incensed by the attack, particularly since Hausas were said to regard personal and public humiliation “one of the most grievous social offences, outweighing in its gravity physical assault” (Kirk-Greene 1971: 9-10).

Tension escalated and six weeks later violence erupted in the erstwhile peaceful Kano (Northern Nigeria). Northerners and Southerners “attacked each other violently, burned and looted each other's houses and stores, mutilating their murdered opponents” (Hatch 1971: 217). Thirty-six people lost their lives and the casualty toll was reported to be two hundred and seventy. Despite the political turmoil, the South continued to press for independence in 1956, and the North

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<sup>9</sup> NCNC was formerly known as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons.

was equally emphatic in rejecting it. The situation was impossibly deadlocked until NPC unexpectedly changed its position in 1956, announcing that it would seek regional self-government in 1959 (three years after regional self-government for the South). Following further bargaining, it was unanimously agreed that 1959 would be the year of destiny, although it was later revised to 1960 (Coleman 1958: 404). On 1 October 1960, Nigeria became the sixteenth sovereign African country.

Before we venture to trace some of the major post-independence developments which led up to Nigeria's devastating civil war in 1967, we should clarify that the above account of the country's journey towards independence is neither the only available account nor is it uncontested. In Part II of this thesis, we will see that whenever Okri reiterates in the *abiku* novels that the birth of the 'fictional' nation has been aborted even before the moment of its birth, that dirty secret pacts have been made between the coloniser and the colonised, and that this great betrayal would set in motion a chain of catastrophic events that would culminate with the civil war, he is possibly alluding to an 'uncut' version of Nigerian history that mainstream accounts have suppressed. We will also later encounter in Okri's *IR* a nefarious character who, although known only by the name Governor-General, bears an uncanny resemblance to the unofficial portrait of Sir James Robertson, the real-life Governor-General of Nigeria who saw the country through independence. In his memoir, Robertson argued that the show of



unity which earned Nigeria its independence had been ephemeral because “the force of tribalism was greater than anyone had estimated” (1974: 256). Or was it? That is one area we will subsequently be examining.

Suffice to say for now that Nigeria was not “well-built upon firm foundations” as claimed the independence day speech of the country’s first Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a Northern leader (1964: 59). Although the post-independence years between 1960 and 1962 were relatively peaceful, nothing had really changed “except the colour of the rich man emerging from the back seat of his car” (Kirk-Greene 1971: 31). In colloquial terms, Nigerians “had only exchanged monkeys for baboons” (Williams 1998a: 289). Instead of materialising the anticipated new social order, educated elites – often more tribalistic than the illiterate masses – turned “shamelessly mean and unscrupulous in their appeal of the baser loyalties of their tribesmen” (Nwankwo and Ifejika 1969: 36). Under Balewa’s “uninspiring and weak leadership” (Nwankwo and Ifejika 1969: 38), the federal and regional governments became embroiled in one plot after the other to weaken their rivals. Amidst increasing political turmoil, the military staged its first coup on 15 January 1966. By the time Nigerians had gathered coherent information about the event, top politicians – including the Northern and Western premiers, the Federal Prime Minister, and a number of top military officers – had been assassinated by the coup-plotters headed by Major Nzeogwu. The East and Mid-West premiers managed to survive the partially-

successful coup which aimed to purge Nigeria of its corrupt “internal otherness” (Žižek 1994: 78), namely tribalists, nepotists, homosexuals, political profiteers, and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

Although the military regime was initially welcomed by ordinary citizens, its benevolent ‘fire brigade’ intervention soon became a suspected Igbo plot to dominate Nigeria. All the signs suddenly confirmed the conspiracy theory: most of the military personnel assassinated were from the North and West while Eastern political leaders were spared, a suspiciously high number of Northerners were dismissed from the air force to make way for Southerners, and the military regime had tried to replace federalism with republicanism, a plan which Northern elites read as an attempt to remove what was and is regarded as “a device to protect differences and ensure that each segment of the country progresses at its own pace” (Osaghae 1998: 60).

Following a groundswell of anti-Igbo sentiment, General Gowon and his Northern backers struck back in a revenge counter-coup code-named Operation *Araba* (‘Secession Day’ in Hausa) in July 1966. What followed was an “orchestrated ritual of blood” (Okafor 1998: 13) in the North, a pre-meditated extermination of an estimated eighty to a hundred thousand Easterners between

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<sup>10</sup> See the transcript of Major Nzeogwu's martial law announcement in Kirk-Greene (1971: 125-127).



May and September 1966 (Osaghae 1998: 63). Victims were said to have been sadistically tortured before being slaughtered like rats. Some were reported to have been “made to swim in ponds of faeces for several hours before being finally shot” (Nwankwo and Ifejika 1969: 159). On account of mounting violence against Easterners and revenge killings of non-Easterners in Eastern cities, the military governor of the Eastern region, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu urged Easterners in other parts of Nigeria to temporarily return to the safety of their home region. Tension continued to mount and in May 1967 the East seceded, sparking Nigeria's civil war. By May 1969, the Republic of Biafra (as the East had named itself) had lost eighty-percent of its territory to federal forces. When the war ended with the defeat of Biafra in 1970, the death toll was a staggering one million, making it “one of the worst civil wars in modern African history and the most expensive both in monetary terms and in human waste” (Irukwu 1983: 171).

Historical accounts of the civil war are split: did Biafra secede for self-serving reasons or was it forced to break away or perish from a Northern attempt to wipe out all Igbos? Was Ojukwu a hero forced to fight for justice (Nwankwo and Ifejika 1969) or was he a “gangster” and a “decrepit and diminutive Hitler” who suffered from an “unbridled desire for personal power” (Federal Ministry of Information 1967b)? In the eyes of the federal government, Biafra's breakaway bid was high treason, an irresponsible attempt to destroy what took years of toil to build (Departments of State and Public Institutions 1969: 8). General Olusegun



Obasanjo insisted that the civil war was not a bloodthirsty Muslim holy war against "the victimised children of the Pope" (Obasanjo 1981: 147). Biafra, he argued, was not the "Israel of Africa" portrayed by influential American Jews. By the federal government's anti-secessionist logic, Nigeria's unity was non-negotiable and Igbos should "once and for all renounce tribal domination and escape from their persecution complex" (African Statesmen 1969: 5). Igbos were further urged to stop harping on "the golden age which they never had" and learn to share with other Nigerians instead of monopolising public offices and trade for themselves (Federal Ministry of Information 1967a).

In radical contrast to the federal view, Biafran sympathisers argued that secession was the only alternative to the prospect of being killed in a Northern-sponsored ethnic-cleansing mission disguised as a one-Nigeria nationalist project. As Nwankwo puts it, it did not matter whether Biafrans supported or rejected the notion of a unitary Nigerian destiny since they had always-already been singled out for extermination: "You were qualified for death so long as you were a Biafran" (1969: 270).

Officially, allegations of genocide were rejected in reports submitted by a team of observers from the United Nations and the Organisation for African Unity (OAU), as well as representatives from countries like Britain, Poland, Sweden and the United States. Nwankwo, however, disputes the findings, arguing that the

delegates had been hoodwinked by scenes staged specifically for their benefit (such as Nigerian soldiers feeding and acting kindly towards Biafran civilians). Contrary to the official line which proclaimed that there was neither victor nor vanquished in a war of brothers, Okafor holds that "the war had a definite victor [North] and an acknowledged vanquished [East]" (1998: 38). The vanquished continued to be punished. First there was the voiding of the Biafran currency which made paupers of most Biafrans. Then there was the deliberate economic and developmental neglect of certain Biafran territories and the systematic political and economic dispossession of Easterners through official policies such as the Indigenisation Decree and the Abandoned Properties Decree.<sup>11</sup> Most significant of all, the war had deepened the wedge between Yorubas and Igbos (who felt betrayed by the Yorubas' non-support of its Biafran cause) and entrenched Northern hegemony.

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<sup>11</sup> The Igboezue Cultural Association claimed that Igbos have been unfairly sidelined from occupying important ministerial positions in Defence, Internal Affairs, Agriculture, Works and Housing, Mines and Power, Transport [and Water] Resources. They further charged that "for over 100 years of the existence of [the] Board of Customs and Excise, no Igbo person has been considered qualified to head the strategic parastatal" (Eguzozie 1999).



# Malaysia

## Anus Horribilis

In keeping with the tradition we have set for ourselves in the previous section, let us begin our analysis of the politics of nationhood in Malaysia with an impolite joke which nevertheless captures the country's prevailing political climate. The joke goes like this: one day, a medical student went to the morgue after class to get a little forensic practice before a final examination. There he proceeded to the table where a body was lying face down, removed the sheet covering the cadaver, and found to his surprise a cork stuck up the corpse's anus. The student pulled out the cork and to his amazement, music and the repetitive chant "*Hidup* Mahathir!" ('Long Live Mahathir!' Mohamad, the Prime Minister) rang out from its anus. The student replaced the cork and the music and chant stopped. Intrigued, the student called out to his professor who is standing nearby, saying "Look at the corpse. This is really something! *Apa macam?*" (Colloquial Malay for 'What do you reckon?') He pulled the cork back out again. Instantly "*Hidup* Mahathir" rang out. "So what?", the professor replied, unimpressed with the student's discovery. "But isn't that the most amazing thing you've ever seen?" the student asked. "Are

you kidding?” replied the professor. “Any asshole can sing praises for Mahathir”.<sup>12</sup>

If the above humour comes across as scathing in its appraisal of Mahathir, it is because there is much to be scathing about. From his critics’ standpoint, Malaysian politics has become increasingly corrupt – or to extend the rectal imagery – ‘full of shit’. So voluptuously excremental that it inspired Shahnnon Ahmad (a well-known Malay writer and more recently politician) to lampoon the Prime Minister and his elite cronies as pieces of excreta in his political novel *Shit @ Pukimak @ PM* (1999). Artistic merits aside, the genre-defying novel is interesting because it does what is rarely done in Malaysia: to openly criticise the Prime Minister and in such scathing terms at that.<sup>13</sup> Set mainly in the large intestines, *Shit* has as its antagonists a hardening tyrant of a *kepala taik* (‘unholy leader’) named PM<sup>14</sup> (also known as PukiMak<sup>15</sup>) who refuses to purge himself and his coalition-of-shit (Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition) from Malaysia’s bowels. PM has no qualms in promoting the stink of the excrescence that is himself as a progressive “new culture” (Shahnnon Ahmad 1999: v). Neither is he

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<sup>12</sup> Adapted from a joke posted on the Democratic Action Party of Malaysia (DAP) internet discussion list by a regular contributor Michael Fong on 28 January 2000. Access DAP website at <http://www.malaysia.net/dap>.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Hooker notes that it was and still is considered improper in traditional Malay society to openly criticise one’s superior. The preferred way of resolving disputes is to avoid bringing the conflict to public notice. “It is a measure of the people’s desperation that they decide to engage in . . . open confrontation” (Hooker 2000: 335).

<sup>14</sup> The initials ‘PM’ is derived from Pukimak although it alludes primarily to ‘Perdana Menteri’ or Prime Minister, in English.

<sup>15</sup> A Malay swear-word, ‘Pukimak’ literally means ‘mother’s cunt’.

disinclined to banish those who dare question the ethics of his iron-fisted rule, as the protagonist Wirawan<sup>16</sup> (Anwar Ibrahim, the sacked Deputy Prime Minister and accused sodomite) discovers when he is rudely expelled from the intestines for not 'playing along'. Cleansed by rain water and subsequently installed as the nation-people's new hero, Wirawan lives his life on the outside fighting for a disciplined regulation of political bowels. His strategy is disarmingly simple: no real exertion on the part of the people is necessary; all they have to do is wait for the foulness in the intestines to purge itself as it necessarily must since "world history has proven that falsity will always be destroyed and replaced by truth" (Shahnon Ahmad 1999: vi). True enough, PM – at the height of his pregnant foulness – self-ejects to the deafening roar of the jubilant nation-peoples.

*Shit* closes with the dawn of a new era of beauty and justice. In contrast, events following Malaysia's 1999 general election clearly demonstrate that beauty and justice do not fall from the sky or come laden in a fairy ship (to borrow Achebe's metaphor), and that they actually have to be worked for and unceasingly defended. In 1999, the Mahathir regime was returned to power after securing two-thirds parliamentary majority, Anwar Ibrahim was put behind bars after a

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<sup>16</sup> 'Wirawan' comes from the stem *wira* ('warrior'). The name also alludes to Anwar Ibrahim, the disgraced and sacked Deputy Prime Minister who was accused of sodomy and became the symbol of the *Reformasi* (reformation) movement, a loose anti-Mahathir grouping consisting of *Pergerakan KeADILan Sosial* (Social Justice Movement or ADIL), led by Anwar's wife Wan Azizah, and supporters from various NGOs and political parties including DAP and PAS.



scandalous show-trial, and Shahnun Ahmad's excrement-free utopia remains stuck in fictional space, untranslated into reality.

The Mahathir regime has denied all charges of ethical perversion levelled against it. It maintains that the judiciary and the parliament have not been rendered subservient to arbitrary executive power (International Bar Association 2000). Likewise the non-debatable privileged position of Malays as *bumiputras* ('sons of the soil', 'original inhabitants') of the country is not institutionalised racism, political domination over country's ethnic minorities or a ploy to create a breed of elites who have since "effectively cornered economic planning and decision-making to enrich themselves while paying lip-service to poverty eradication" (Mehmet 1986: Preface). Malaysians should not doubt that Malaysia is a secular Islamic nation even though the term is oxymoronic and the constitution clearly defines it as secular (Lim 2001).<sup>17</sup> *Dhimmis* (non-Muslims) need not be unduly worried that their religious freedom is being eroded even though more than thirty Indian temples in the state of Selangor have recently been identified for demolition because "We do not want temples mushrooming" (Mohamad Khir Toyo, in Perumal 2001).

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<sup>17</sup> Lim Kit Siang clears up what is effectively an artificially-created confusion: The first Prime Minister and Bapa Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who held office for 15 years as head of government, two years as Chief Minister 1955-1957 and thirteen years as Prime Minister, 1957-1960, never saw Malaysia as an Islamic State. If he had, he would not have made the following declaration in parliament soon after independence: "I would like to make clear that this country is not an Islamic State as it is generally understood, we merely provided that Islam shall be the official religion of the State" (Hansard 1 May 1958, in Lim 2001).

Similarly, human rights in Malaysia have not been reduced “to a namesake directly confronting the rule of law” (Rais Yatim, in Lim 1998: 9). According to Mahathir, human rights are not just about political dissent. Citizens cannot be allowed to express dissenting views at the expense of political stability, economic development and the livelihood of the innocent. That is why, as explained in a booklet published by the Information Ministry’s Special Affairs Department, citizens must at all times deal with the government only by “informing and advising with gentle words” (Loone 2001). This is because Prophet Mohammad had allegedly taught his followers that “whosoever wishes to advise the authorities about a matter should not do it directly, but should instead hold the person’s hand and give the advice privately. If the advice is accepted, that is a good thing, but if it is not accepted, the adviser is considered to have carried out his responsibilities” (Loone 2001). For the aforementioned reasons, Malaysian who travel, study or reside abroad should not criticise the government so as to avoid having their passports impounded upon their return.<sup>18</sup>

Mahathir has untiringly insisted that “democracy has been successfully practised” in Malaysia because “Malaysians, Malaysian politicians and Malaysian political parties know how to use this democratic system” (1998a). Many

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<sup>18</sup> In recent times, seventy-eight citizens have reportedly been “banned from going abroad for having tarnished Malaysia’s image on previous trips” (Tong 2001a).



scholars, however, beg to differ.<sup>19</sup> Malaysia does have such conventional markers of democratic as the institution of parliament and regular elections. However, the presence of these features does not suggest the threshold of democracy has been reached. Besides, “democratic and authoritarian characteristics . . . do not necessarily contradict each other but can often be mutually supporting” (Crouch 1996: 5). An authoritarian regime can conduct free elections in such a way that it would never lose. It may restrict political competition, manipulate the media, and legalise arbitrary arrests and detention without trial. It may also use Islam to give its opposition containment strategies the appearance of divine necessity.<sup>20</sup>

Internationally, Mahathir is regarded by many as the chief architect of Malaysia's oppressive political culture. As John Funston notes, even though authoritarianism pre-dates Mahathir, Mahathir is the one who has “carried the process forward substantially” (Funston 2001: 192). He has amended the constitution and added to it a collection of laws which enhances executive power and reduces individual rights. For successive years the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has put Mahathir on its ‘Enemies of the Press’ list which features the likes of Robert Mugabe and Jiang Zemin, describing him as “openly contemptuous of press freedom” and “notoriously thin-skinned” when exposed by

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<sup>19</sup> See Wong (1995), Munro-Kua (1996), Syed Faris Alatas (1997), Crouch (1996), and Gomez (1999).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Astora Jabat's essay ‘ISA Menurut Rasulullah’ (‘The Internal Security Act, according to God’) in which the draconian Internal Security Act (which allows for arbitrary arrest and detention without trial) is justified as Islamic by referring to the Quran (2001).

foreign media which he “regularly demonizes” (CPJ 2001). In all fairness, one has to concede that Mahathir is not the barefaced despot that Nigeria's Sani Abacha was. Coincidentally or otherwise, in the time Mahathir has been in power, Malaysia has experienced some remarkable economic growth and infrastructural development. When he unexpectedly resigned from all official positions in July 2002, the general public was even reported to have expressed overwhelming sadness and reluctance to let him go. “It is sad Dr Mahathir is resigning, because if it were not for him, the country would not have achieved so much”, an eighteen year-old college student from Sepang was quoted to have said in a media interview (Malay Mail, 26 June 2002). Another interviewee even said, without irony, that “We are not ready to go as we still need him to fight for our rights.”

If it is true, as Mahathir reasons, that “we can live in comfort, we can work and earn a living from our toil” (Mahathir Mohamad 1998), what then have Malaysians to complain about? Are they not at least obliged to “obey and listen to the government whether [they like] it or not, as long as [they are] not asked to do evil”, as the aforementioned government booklet advises (Loone 2001)? To the informed observer, the above questions might seem overly naive. But it should be remembered that Malaysians who have been deeply “socialised . . . to accept and even appreciate authoritarian rule, norms and institutions” (Gomez and Jomo 1999: 4) do not always recognise the reality of their oppression, just as the



“experience of subordination does not guarantee that the subordinated social agent will develop a radical perspective *vis-à-vis* her subjection” (Smith 1998a: 8).

Conceivably, some Malaysians would genuinely be unable to understand how they might be seen as oppressed (in the same way that the proverbial ‘stupid’ native cannot integrate into his belief system the ‘impossible’ fact that white men in colonial metropolitan centres actually work as manual labourers, the traditional occupation of lowly races). The majority, however, tends to misrecognise the reality of things in the Lacanian sense of the term. As illustration, although ethnic minorities in Malaysia know that the Law recognises them as full-fledged citizens but effectively treats them like an inconvenient leftover of colonialism, they continue to act in their daily lives as if they do not know, as if the playing field is not tilted against them by virtue of their ‘race’, and as if they *are* the surplus population of the country. By contrast, there is what Maniam calls a “new diaspora”, a small minority of men and women dispersed among various cultural communities, all living “within a common mental and imaginative space” (1997: 22-3). Members of the new diaspora are “insiders and outsiders at the same time; they know that they are conditioned by their individual cultures but at the same time they will not [allow] themselves to be circumscribed by them.” They are not only cognisant of the falsity of the Malaysian fantasy of peaceful coexistence, but are also prepared to expose it as “a gift of shit” (Lacan 1998: 268). As will be explained further in Chapter 7, they seek to radicalise the Malaysian way of life



(by repoliticising normalised racial identities and sedimented sociosymbolic practices) and hegemonise a new national imaginary which is “less dominated by race and religion but by issues of justice, freedom, democracy and good governance” (Lim 1999b).

Malaysians seeking to traverse the national fantasy are invariably branded by the government as extremists, puppets of the west, terrorists and/or internal traitors envious of Malaysia’s Nation-Thing. To paraphrase the Prime Minister, ‘they’ are resentful of the peace, development and safety in the country and its ability to defend itself from attacks by foreigners (Tan 2001). ‘They’ have even been targeted in a special government campaign called the ‘Seven M Operations’ which was launched in 1999 to eradicate the ‘seven deadly sins’ (slander, lie, hate, scold, cast bad impression on others, incite hate, swear) of its critics. Uncannily, even when we know full well that it is absurd to regard all who criticise the government as enemies of the nation, we still sometimes experience irrational guilt for identifying with ‘their’ cause. There is always the ‘good citizen’ side of us that shies away from doing anything that will make us appear as troublemakers in the critical gaze of the Authorities. This unfortunately is generally true of Malaysian society which has historically proven to be politically docile and apathetic in comparison to its Nigerian counterpart. Despite wanting political change, Malaysians in general are not inclined to rock the boat too much, as Maniam too concedes (Lim 1999a). They are fearful of being targets of regime

crackdown, and of turning the country into “a second Afghanistan” (Mahathir Mohamad, in Tan 2001) or another Indonesia where lives and livelihood have been destroyed by runaway political passions. That the people should suffer irrational guilt and fear, and unconsciously censor themselves from contemplating emancipatory political alternatives also has much to do with how they are constantly reminded through the media of the horrors that would certainly be unleashed if the ruling coalition were no longer the government of the day. Still, this does not mean they do not ‘enjoy’ their fantasy that ‘everything is OK’ even though they are, in actual fact, oppressed.

It is in this context that Maniam is located as a writer who concerns himself not only with articulations of competing nationhood ideals and their impact on social relations in Malaysia, but also with the repoliticisation of these sedimented relations. However, as will be made clear in Chapters 6 and 7, although the political big picture weighs heavily on Maniam's thoughts, he does not directly knock against the larger forces in the way Shahnnon Ahmad does in *Shit @ Pukimak @ PM*. His prime focus is the small picture, that is, insignificant individuals striving to make something of themselves, yearning to belong but constantly reminded of their alienness and relative insignificance in the Malay scheme of things. In Maniam's words:

I'm preoccupied with the question of whether you belong or don't belong. Why as a writer I'm so preoccupied with that is because everywhere you turn they ostracise you. They say you're a nobody. So, you have to find out why you're a nobody and how you can become a somebody. Or the forces that have made you a nobody. (Lim 1999a)

### **Before the Beginning**

In Malaysia the issue of 'race' is as thorny as 'tribe' is in Nigeria. More than four decades after independence was declared, race continues to divide the nation, the core from the surplus population, Malays from non-Malays. The division is by no means natural. Although the ruling regime sporadically stresses the importance of creating *Bangsa Malaysia* ('the Malaysian people') which transcends race and religion, it has also actively acerbated racial antagonisms, albeit not to the point where they become unmanageable. As a Chinese Malaysian parliamentarian explains in his "boiling kettle theory", Malay leaders from UMNO (the hegemonic Malay-Islamic party in the ruling coalition) are skilful enough to know "precisely when and how much to lift the 'lid' in order to keep Chinese resentment from boiling over" (Case 1995: 350). That the regime should perpetuate the biological notion of race is hardly surprising, considering how the legitimacy of Malay dominance literally hinges on the perpetuation of a sharp racial distinction in the country. That, including what we have touched on so far

and more, is nicely captured in the poem by Cecil Rajendra which Malay organisations have denounced as inflammatory, seditious, anti-Malay and anti-Islam (Tong 2001b):

*Kingdom of Purplaya*

The Kingdom of Purplaya  
is located somewhere in Asia  
slightly north of the Equator.

Its people are of mixed origins:  
some Indonesians, some Chinese  
some Indians, some Portuguese . . .

Most Purplayans were immigrants  
from the neighbouring countries;  
only a handful are pure indigenes

who live up in the mountains  
and are hunters & fruit gatherers  
but not land-owners – just tenants.

These natives – true sons of the soil –  
have been made marginal  
by usurpers who stole their mantle

claiming that they are the original  
god-chosen people of Purplaya and all



others, including indigenes, are mere aliens.

To ensure their privileges in perpetuity  
this 'purple' bunch of pretenders  
(With aid of their colonial masters)

drew up a farcical Constitution  
which ensured that King & President  
would always be of their persuasion.

They implemented a quota system  
to reserve places for their children  
in school, college & university;

stuffed ranks of Police & Army  
with officers of their nomination  
to protect their pockets & property;

and legislated that any question  
of their special powers & position  
would invite a charge of treason.

These self-anointed 'purple people'  
now enjoy licences unlimited  
for they are the only ones free

to libel enemies in their papers  
burn effigies on street-corners  
while other citizens of the country

face torture & imprisonment  
if they criticise the government  
or organise any kind of rally

Still, this apartheid autocracy  
– the world's last bastion  
of institutionalised racism –

harbours pretensions extraordinary  
and lays claim to be  
the only true surviving democracy! (Rajendra 2001)

To understand how Malaysia became an “apartheid autocracy”, let us now trace the history of the land and its peoples. The story of Malaysia normally begins with Melaka, a sultanate state founded in 1400 by Paramesvara, a refugee prince from Palembang. Situated where the state of Melaka is today, the sultanate with China as its overlord quickly rose to fame and prosperity as a cosmopolitan entrepot state in the fifteenth century. The spread of Islam to the region and its adoption as the state religion during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah (1446-1459) further enhanced its power and prestige. Melaka lasted about a hundred years before it was invaded and captured by the Portuguese in 1511. It was not until 1957, after going through the hands of British and Japanese and British forces, that Melaka and the other states in Malaysia re-found independence.

The centuries before Melaka's founding are generally treated as relatively unimportant in the historical evolution of modern Malaysia. According to Andaya and Andaya (2001), the reasons for that are usually attributed to difficulties in reconstructing the pre-1400s. Tangible evidence of pre-Melaka is hard to come by. Sources are often opaque or fragmented. Furthermore evidence decay rapidly in a tropical climate. These are not unreasonable reasons but there is a little more to it than that. In both Malay nationalist discourse and the popularly-consumed state-sanctioned version of Malaysian history, the lack of emphasis accorded to the pre-Melakan period has also to do with the fact that before Melaka there was not a void but the pre-Islamic era, a time when societies in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago were held sway by Hindu-Buddhist culture or "the irrational, non-scientific and fairy-tale ideas", according to Shahnnon Ahmad (Solehah Ishak 1998: 83).

It is played down by the state<sup>21</sup> but not unwritten in history books that before Islam was brought to Melaka (in the first half of the fifteenth century by Indian-Muslim traders), the region was predominantly Hindu-Buddhist in character. Archaeological investigations and Chinese imperial chronicles show that Indianised kingdoms were already firmly established in many parts of

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<sup>21</sup> In his cogent study 'The Construction of the Post-Colonial Subject in Malaysia', C.W. Watson identifies the "accepted" version of Malaysian history as "the dominant discourse articulated throughout the system and given voice in the hegemonic institutions of Malaysia: the media, the education system and the party machines of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition of parties" (Watson 1996: 306).



southeast Asia by the middle of the eighth century. These include estuarine settlements facing the Straits of Melaka. Andaya and Andaya underline that the kingdoms which existed then were not mere trading posts but states which stood in a tradition of government (2001: 23). Excavations in thirty local sites have provided strong evidence of a thriving economy based in Kedah (a northern state in Malaysia) in as early as the fourth century. A grander example is the kingdom of Srivijaya which existed between the late seventh century and the late thirteenth century. Located in Palembang, Srivijaya was one of the wealthiest and most prestigious of the early harbour ports. The “uncontested master of the Straits”, Srivijaya was renowned across the world not only as a cultured maritime kingdom but also as “a centre of knowledge that could hold its own against far older kingdoms”. The Andayas write:

Perhaps the greatest indication of the respect given to scholarship in Srivijaya was the strength of religion. When the Chinese pilgrim Yiqing went there in 671 he found a community of over 1000 Buddhist monks, and in his own writings he commended the city as a place to study the Buddhist scriptures. With the wealth brought in by trade, Srivijayan rulers could sponsor religious studies and maintain religious foundations. One maharaja endowed a Taoist temple in Canton while another rebuilt a Buddhist sanctuary in India’s great pilgrimage centre of Nalanda. Although the nature of Buddhism in Srivijaya is not totally clear, several schools, including Tantrism, coexisted. When the history of Buddhism in the archipelago is understood more fully, Srivijaya



may assume even more importance as a dissemination point for religious ideas. (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 27)

Following Srivijaya's decline, Melaka rose to prominence in the fifteenth century by following many of the traditions set by its predecessor. China was courted for its protection, commercial facilities were made attractive to lure traders away from rival ports, security was given a high priority, and the legal-administrative machinery was kept efficient. The structure of government too was borrowed from Srivijaya. Melaka's dynastic rulers stood at the apex of society and at the centre of all meaningful activities. They also positioned themselves as sacred descendents of Palembang royalty which mythically sprung from the line of Alexander the Great.

In Malay nationalist discourse, Melaka's adoption of Islam in the fifteenth century is regarded as the main contribution to the evolution of Malay culture. The pattern of government and the particular lifestyle it established are taken as the foundations of traditional Malay culture and statecraft (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 39). In the eyes of these nationalists, Melaka is the honoured fount of Malay historical memory. The kingdom's founding is also taken to mark the zero-level of Malaysia's beginning which revolves around the Malay subject as the privileged agent of history. This Malay-centric interpretation of history has not gone uncontested. Andaya and Andaya argue that the early centuries before

Melaka were not “merely a prelude to the great Malay power” (2001: 36-7) and that the “story of Malaysia does not . . . begin at Melaka” (2001: 7). Melaka is only part of a constructed historical continuum, not the objective foundation which legitimises *ketuanan Melayu* (‘Malay supremacy’) in modern-day Malaysia. Read against the grain, the severance of early Melaka from what preceded it may be seen as a deliberate attempt to ‘overlook’ the past in its entirety – a past which, given full attention, threatens to unveil as false the claim that “the Malays are not just the *pribumi* or indigenous community but also the people to whom this country belongs” (Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, in Cheah 1996: 66). It is possibly for this reason that laws were passed in Malaysia to criminalise any debate on the political and moral legitimacy of the Malays’ special status.

In addition, it is crucial to note that historical evidence of the route by which Malays came to settle in pre-Melakan Malaya is far from conclusive. Malay nationalists would undoubtedly refute the theory that the first Malays originated from Yunnan in southern China rather than Sumatra in Indonesia. According to the theory, Proto-Malays made their way to Malaya and on to the islands beyond in a drawn-out series of migration between 2500 and 1500 BC. Upon arrival in Malaya, they “forced the original Negrito inhabitants back into the hills and jungles” (Ryan 1971: 3-4). Then from about 300 BC the second wave of Malay migration began. Also from Yunnan, the second batch of migrants

known as Deutoro-Malays arrived in Malaya, “overcame the Proto-Malays and pushed them inland where they remained and are known today as Jakun” (1971: 4). The early Malays were animists but were later influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist culture which Indian traders and voyagers brought to the region. Among other sources, Chinese chronicles show that by the middle of the eighth century Indian culture had become dominant in the region. By the fourteenth century Malaya had “absorbed much of the civilisation of India” (1971: 13). Paramesvara, the founder of Melaka, is even believed to be a Mahayanist Buddhist who practised a form of Buddhism which bore Tantric and Hindu influences. “Recent research indicates he never converted to Islam; this apostasy was performed by his grandson” (Dumarcay and Smithies 1998: 9).

The influence of Indian culture on Malay culture is generally played down, if not altogether repudiated in Malay nationalist discourse. In 1919, Windstedt, a well-known educationist and author of Malay culture and traditions, was severely criticised for putting forward the theory that “Malay culture had its origin in India and that even Islam came to the peninsula via India” (Khoo 1993: 271). A certain Muhammad Al-Johari had written in to *Pengasuh* (a publication of the Kelantan Religious Council), countering that any similarity between Indian and Malay cultures would be coincidental and that Arabs from Hadramaut were more likely the ones who brought Islam to Malaya. That incident, according to historian Khoo Kay Kim, was “practically the beginning of conscious attempts to

deny that Malay culture had borrowed heavily from [Hindu-]Indian culture” (1993: 271).

### **Surplus Population**

From the late nineteenth century until the 1930s, colonial Britain had actively encouraged mass migration from China and India to Malaya to supply labour demands in the booming tin-mining and rubber plantation sectors. Some migrants responded with the hope of finding a better life. Others took it as an opportunity to flee from political oppression in their homeland. Almost all migrants arrived poor, but there were crucial differences between the Chinese and Indians. The Chinese mostly arrived as free rather than indentured labourers. This meant that they were freer to move in and out of the different sectors of the economy. Over a generation or two, their mobility had helped them fare better economically, and for some to move into the middle and upper strata of colonial society (Muzaffar 1993: 213). Still, only a small minority had truly made it economically. Many who failed were said to have “developed a defeatist and fatalistic attitude” and opted to remain overseas to “let their lives fade away rather than lose face in front of relatives and kinsmen in their home villages” (Yen 1986: 8). By the late 1960s, a select few Chinese individuals had come to hold thirty-four percent of the nation's equities. (Foreign interests held more than sixty-percent of the wealth while Malays held about four percent.) This reinforced the racial fantasy that all



Chinese were wealthy (and dangerously deceptive if ever they declared themselves poor) and therefore “opportunistic” and “avaricious” (Rabushka 1973: 64). In reality Chinese mean income in 1970 was “still considered destitute as compared to other developed countries. The striking difference between the races was that one was more destitute than the others were” (Boo 1998: 32).

By contrast, Indian migrants who arrived in Malaya were crippled from the outset. They were a captive labour force ripe for exploitation by colonial capitalism, effectively slaves or “objects of contempt and ridicule” who had to “cringe and crawl before the others” (Muzaffar 1993: 215). To add to their woes, they were indoctrinated to remain subservient within the *kangany* (‘foreman’) system of plantation management. Within the system, the *kangany* who is usually a labourer of a higher caste acted not only as a link between India and the labourers’ new world but also as “something of a father figure” and an enforcer of social discipline (Arasaratnam 1993: 194).

The entire plantation system had in fact trapped workers and their families in a life that held little hope of upward socioeconomic mobility. Wages were kept at the barest minimum and working conditions were harsh in the malaria-infested plantation zone, popularly seen as “a death trap yawning to engulf the surplus population of India” (Sandhu 1993: 153). In general, Indian labourers were undernourished, the mortality rate was high, and social problems like domestic

violence, crime, alcoholism and destitution in old age were rampant. Even formal education, the standard escape route from poverty, failed to make any significant impact. Instead of imparting meaningful skills, Tamil-medium plantation schools only prepared students for manual jobs, which were in line with their role as “an agent of social control and meeting the manpower needs of the plantation economy” (Marimuthu 1993: 465).

The oppression of the Indian community in Malaysia maimed not only the migrant generation but also successive ones. Today the Indian community remains one of the most marginalised ethnic groups in the country. Its members constitute the lowest strata of Malaysian society and are negatively stereotyped as toddy-drinking habitual liars who are furthermore great pretenders lacking in personal cleanliness and susceptible to melodrama (Khoo 1993: 279). Perhaps the only thing more unfortunate than the community's misfortune is the prevalent belief that its lowly status is the result of predestination when it is largely the result of long-term oppression and neglect (Ramasamy 1984).

### **Malay-in-itself**

Like Indians and Chinese, Malays too have had to grapple with European modernity which colonialism ushered in. According to Mahathir in his polemical book *The Malay Dilemma*, Malays were especially ill-prepared for the turbulence

of modernisation and social change because they had been over-accustomed to an idyllic existence in the precolonial land of plenty where in-breeding and polygamy were commonplace. At any rate, he says,

the hot, humid climate of the land was not conducive to either vigorous work or even to mental activity. Thus, except for a few, people were content to spend their unlimited leisure in merely resting or in extensive conversation with neighbours and friends.  
(1970: 21-2)

Ill-prepared and unable to compete, Malays were said to have had to “retreat before the onslaught of the Chinese immigrants” (Mahathir Mohamad 1970: 25). Being strong and resourceful, the latter had upon their arrival in Malaya “destroyed the self-reliance of Malays in craftsmanship, skilled work and business” (1970: 27). (Curious little is made of Indian immigrants – something which perhaps points to their relative insignificance in the political scheme of things.) The textbook fear and loathing of the Other which Mahathir’s writing demonstrates is and was not uncommon among Malay-centric Malays. Like Mohd. Eunos Abdullah, Abdullah Rahim Kajai and other early Malay ideologists who harangued Malays to remember their race and make it great and powerful, they tend to paint themselves as victims and blame the Chinese for having “successfully sucked” their racial life-blood (Milner 1998: 156, 161; see also Lee 1965b: 58). The ultra battle-cry can be heard as loudly today, as attested by the

following (translated) poem which Mahathir, “choked with emotion [and] almost in tears” (2001), recited at an UMNO summit in Kuala Lumpur:

*Melayu Mudah Lupa ('Malays Forget Easily')*

Malays forget easily  
Malays forget easily  
Malays forget easily  
Malays forget easily  
Malays forget easily  
That their race was oppressed  
Malays forget easily  
That their race was divided  
Malays forget easily  
That their race used to be screaming/shouting  
Malays forget easily  
That their race used to be ignorant/idiots  
Malays forget easily  
That their race was second-class  
Malays forget easily  
That their race was looked down upon  
Malays forget easily  
That their race used to be in disputes  
Malays forget easily  
That their race suffered  
Malays forget easily  
That their race was belittled  
Malays forget easily



That their race was isolated  
with no sovereignty, no honour, no freedom  
Malays forget easily  
Malays forget easily  
Malays forget easily  
The history of their sleeping race  
And their dry and bleeding land  
Remember, remember my race  
Not to forget easily again  
For your struggles are not over yet. (2001)

However much one disagrees with the Prime Minister's belief that tropical climate encourages lotus-eating and low mental activity, and that Malays forget easily, one simply cannot deny that Malays had been gravely wronged. As is well known, Britain's colonial policies deliberately sought to keep rural Malays docile and backward. Higher education was made available only to sons of Malay aristocrats and royalty so that they could later be absorbed into the Malay Administrative Service. The rest had had to contend with training that only went so far as to improve their lot as agriculturalists (Cheah 1996: 45). The most significant contributing factor to the Malay dilemma, however, is rarely raised in everyday discourse in Malaysia. In his study on the ontological foundations of pre-colonial Malay polity, Anthony Milner (1995) posits that much of the problem is rooted in the customary pacification and socialisation of ordinary Malays by their elites into being 'good Malays', "always unobtrusive and self-

effacing” by Mahathir's definition (1970: 160). Drawing from the journals of Munshi Abdullah, a well-known early nineteenth-century Malay translator and language teacher, Milner underlines that

the main reason for the Malay situation . . . is the ‘tyranny and injustice of the government of the rajas, especially towards their own subjects.’ Abdullah declares he would never wish to settle in the Malay territories which lay beyond the British settlements: ‘To live close to a raja is like making friends with a poisonous snake.’ (1995: 15)

Malay common subjects were ruled by autocratic feudal laws which discouraged any kind of change. They were prohibited from acquiring a private identity, knowledge and property, or even lifting their heads and enjoying themselves. According to Abdullah, the ruler's authority was so absolute that it allowed him to humiliate his subjects “as though he thought of them as animals” (Milner 1995: 19). Few had dared to challenge the ruler's power because he was seen as *Dzil Allah fil'alam*, “the shadow of Allah on earth” (Tham 1981b: 254). Those who “dared to act contrary to the customs and beliefs traditionally associated with Malay life and institutions” were punishable by the *daulat* (‘magical powers’) the ruler was believed to exude.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Daulat* is an Arabic expression of the Hindu concept of God's *sakti* which the Srivijayan court may have invoked and propagated to ward off acts of *derhaka* (‘treason against the ruler’) by the ruler's subjects (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 27).

Apart from highlighting the today-forgotten fact that Malays have traditionally been oppressed by their leaders, Munshi Abdullah's journals also reveal a disparity between the notion of Malayness during his time and contemporary conception which retroactively posits early Melaka sultanate as the country's golden lost origin.<sup>23</sup> According to Milner (1995), what foreigners perceived as elements of unity (religion, language, literature, clothing, legal system, political culture) in the early nineteenth century were "more obvious to outsiders than to Malays themselves." Malays then identified themselves not as Malays but as subjects of their ruler and members of their dialect group, e.g. Javanese, Sumatran, Rawa, Achenese, Minangkabau, Bugis and so on (Shamsul 1998: 137). It was only when western racial discourse seeped into the writings of Malay ideologues via colonialism that *Bangsa Melayu* ('the Malay race') was invented and gradually became a formal social category in Malay thought (Watson 1996: 311).<sup>24</sup> Radical Malay nationalists once defined 'Malay' to include Indonesians. The Malaysian Constitution subsequently narrowed it to designate a Malaysian-born individual who "professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks Malay, and conforms to Malay custom" (1998: 162). As it stands today, those persons of the Malay race who, for whatever reason, do not profess the religion of

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<sup>23</sup> Malay polities and their royal palaces were not as noble and dignified as commonly believed. Munshi Abdullah noted, for example, that the walls of the royal dwelling of the ruler of Trengganu (a Malay state in Peninsula Malaysia) were "covered with dirt, spittle, betel juice and moss" (Milner 1995: 14). Housing for commoners was even more shabby. In Pahang (another Malay state) "piles of rubbish under them emitted a foul odour which 'filled one's nose'" (1995: 14-15).

<sup>24</sup> In precolonial times, ethnic orientation could be discarded and acquired with ease by altering one's customs, language and attire (Milner 1998: 159).

Islam (for instance, a Malay who converts out of Islam) is considered to have automatically forfeited his status as a Malay (Shaq Faruqi 2002).

Because the above definition of 'Malay' is an ethnic rather than a racial definition (since there is no blood qualification), it should follow, as is in fact provided under Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian Constitution, that "Muslims of non-Malay races . . . Arab, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, Siamese, Philippine and Kampuchean who speak Malay, observe Malay custom and have roots in the country by way of birth or descent *can be deemed to be Malays*" (emphasis added, Shaq Faruqi 2002). Things in real life do not however work out quite so straightforwardly. An individual from an ethnic minority group may satisfy all the legal requirements and yet not be accepted as a 'real' Malay. Indian-Muslims are a case in point. *Peranakan* Chinese is another as example. Despite having absorbed Malay language, dressing and traditions into their culture, they are still "genetically" Other, writes Mohd. Taib Osman (1988: 128). Could the reason for this perhaps be attributed to the belief that one does not become Malay, one can only be Malay by birth. Could it perhaps be that his physical appearance, the way his racial markers (skin tone, hair texture, body shape and so forth) deviate from the Malay 'norm'? If so, then would his marginalisation not be racially discriminatory? In any case, our main concern here is not simply that the subject is discriminated against because his racial markers give him away as 'non-Malay'. Recall, as we discussed previously, that what really 'irritates the shit' out of the



racist is not (limited to) the 'actual properties' of the object but *objet petit a*, the uncanny spectral 'something more' in the Other which manifests itself in and through the Other's racial markers. *Objet petit a* functions as a fetish by means of which the racist is able to preserve his unproblematic identity and misrecognise the fact that, as 'pure Malay', he does not exist. K. Das explains:

You scratch a Malay and you are likely to find anything from a Thai to a Turk, from a Makasarese to a Malayali underneath, or a bit of a Chinese or even a scrap of an *Orang Putih* [Caucasian]. Similarly you scratch a Chinese and the fellow who lies below the surface can be anyone from a Mongolian to a Malay. Or a Portuguese. And Penang [one of the states in Malaysia] is full of Indians with Malay (or is it Malay with Indian) blood thumping UMNO tables as vigorously as Dollah or Anwar or Daim or Kadir or Mahathir. (Das 1987: 18-19)<sup>25</sup>

'Pure Malay' qua Malay-in-itself as discursively constructed by the likes of the Prime Minister is ultimately a fiction since it works only if its inherent impossibility is transposed into a prohibition. 'What I am not', in other words, must be turned into 'what I am prevented from fully becoming' by assigning to the Other (the West, internal traitors, sodomites, vampiric Chinese) the role of external blockage, as the ones always desiring to 'do us in'. Additionally, the Other as the embodiment of the non-existence of Malay-in-itself must not only

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<sup>25</sup> What K. Das is insinuating here is the well-known belief that many Malays, including Mahathir himself, are actually 'tainted' with Indian blood.

always remain delimited as radically Other, it must also be antagonised, baited and made to suffer pain – why? Recall that what is at stake in (institutionalised) racism is never just about political power and material wealth. At the bottom of it, there is the obscene surplus-enjoyment to which the racist is ‘addicted’ and which ‘washes over’ him when he *hentam* (a colloquial Malay-sian term for ‘beat the shit’ out of) his victim, be it physically, verbally, politically, etc. “The victim’s pain has the weight of an ontological proof: it demonstrates that the [racial] Other exists in the real, beyond symbolic fiction, in the fullness of his/her being” (Žižek 1996a: 105). Just as importantly, it attests to the racist’s (fantasy of his epiphenomenal) existence: ‘I (qua ‘pure Malay’ must) exist because the Other’s existence in the real, its dependence upon my magnanimity for the alleviation of his/her pain which I caused, is proof that I exist.’

### **(De)politicising Politics**

Perhaps it is this partiality for enjoyment that drives the ruling regime to continually antagonise ethnic minorities in Malaysia. Take, as case in point, the controversy surrounding the debate on the National Culture Policy in the 1980s. Then, in a Sadean rash of Malay cultural revivalism, the ruling regime declared that “Malay identity must be moulded and developed in all aspects of national culture. In this respect there should be no give-and-take” (Foreign Minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, in Kua 1985: 18). Where other cultures were concerned, only

certain “suitable elements” may be included but they could only be seen as “adjuncts” to the central *bumiputra* component. Unsurprisingly, the policy which effectively amounted to *culturocide* caused a *furor* amongst the “new immigrants”, a derogatory term that the now disgraced former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (then the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport) had used in referring to non-Malay *citizens* of the country (Kua 1985: 18: 83). The position of those who objected to the move was succinctly put in a statement jointly issued by fifteen concerned Chinese organisations:

It is fundamentally wrong to justify the policy using the Constitutional provision for the ‘special position of the Malays’. That provision was included specially to safeguard the economic and religious position of the Malays and the position of the Rulers, NOT to be used as justification for cultural predominance over the other cultures. (Kua 1985: 84-5)

Anwar Ibrahim responded to protests by assuring ethnic minorities that “the incorporation of Islamic values in the national culture was not to eclipse other cultures.” To suppress other cultures, he said, “was like practising narrow nationalism, and such a practice was inconsistent with Islamic teachings” (Kua 1985: 30). As a show of the regime’s sincerity and good intentions, he subsequently announced that it was “willing to hold talks with anyone” – on the condition that the policy was not criticised. Criticisms, said Anwar, would be rejected because those who criticise (that is, ‘politicise’ the issue) “would only

cause a lot of misunderstanding” (1985: 46-8).<sup>26</sup> The view was echoed by other UMNO leaders, one of whom declared that those who questioned the implementation of the policy were “breaking the unity of the people” (1985: 22).

The circumvention of debate and the branding of detractors as politicking troublemakers are two examples of how racism and anti-democratic practices may work together to obscure the power relations operating behind the appearance of neutrality. Indeed, as Žižek underscores, “the basic aim of antidemocratic politics is and was depoliticization – that is, the unconditional demand that ‘things should go back to normal’, with each individual doing his or her particular job” (1999f: 188). In Malaysia, strategic depoliticisation is regularly employed by the powers that be as a means to naturalise Malay supremacy and neutralise opposition. To illustrate this, we might recall an interesting propagandist film-clip which was heavily rotated on Malaysian television channels in the months leading up to the 1999 general election. The film-clip, a high-budget animation reminiscent of Walt Disney's animated feature film *Pocahontas*, made its appearance at a time when Malaysia was in deep turmoil.<sup>27</sup> Sponsored and ‘dedicated’ to all Malaysians, the film-clip depicts a happy crew of men and women in various shades of brown

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<sup>26</sup> Under the Act of Sedition, discussions deemed “likely to arouse racial feelings and endanger racial peace in the country” are punishable by a fine and imprisonment (Morris-Hale 1996: 184).

<sup>27</sup> Anwar Ibrahim, the Deputy Prime Minister long regarded as Mahathir's successor, had been ignominiously sacked, the Malay community was bitterly split between Mahathir and Anwar, and the *reformasi* movement was staging street demonstrations every week, demanding justice for Anwar and the reinstatement of democracy.



(denoting perhaps the different ethnic communities in Malaysia) breezing homeward on a ship built in the topographical shape of West Malaysia. In the midst of enjoying each other's convivial companionship, dark storm clouds suddenly gather in the distance and billow threateningly towards them. Alarmed but poised, they hurriedly prepare the ship for the most violent storm they have yet encountered. The storm hits. Crashing waves and howling winds slap the ship hither and thither. 'Water, water everywhere, but not a drop will we drink!', the determined look on their faces seem to speak. In response to their impudent defiance, a giant wave comes rolling in (in slow-motion for heightened dramatic effect). The wave effaces the ship. A long eerie silence . . . then the ship breaks through. The crew roars with triumph and instantly it is blue skies again. The crew sails towards a safe harbour on some mystical paradise home-land to the cheer of weeping family and friends. And the classic finale: the 'star' crew-members comprising loving, doe-eyed, brown-skinned husband, wife and child stand united and proud, eyes streaming tears of joy. The camera pans in on the beaming family, the glorious sun rises behind them, seagulls flutter peacefully across the screen. The End.

The moral of the film-clip was clear enough even to mesmerised Malaysians who had never before seen such sophisticatedly-produced propaganda on Malaysian television: in these turbulent times when the country was facing one of its worst crisis since independence and when economies in the region were

allegedly being battered by George Soros, his Jewish associates and rogue currency traders, Malaysians of all races should show that they are 'true Malaysians' (emulate the crew in their unwavering solidarity) by putting aside their 'petty' complaints against the government and by gathering behind it (instead of opposing it) so that, together, the country might emerge from the 'storm' stronger and more prosperous than ever before. The other lesson of the film-clip was of course that western neo-imperialists and their Malaysian stooges were trying to steal the fruits of Malaysia's hard work and success. They were also responsible for the country's crisis, not the government. Unpatriotic critics should therefore stop barking up the wrong tree.

It goes without saying that the film-clip which faithfully reproduced the regime's standard rhetoric<sup>28</sup> during the crisis period was a 'naïve' falsification of reality, that it conveniently overlooked the "tens of thousands [of multiethnic Malaysians who] took to the streets or cyberspace to criticize government leaders" (Funston 2001: 167), and that the projected peaceful system of different subject positions (Malaysians of all races living in perfect harmony) merely whitewashed the underlying interethnic tensions the regime had instigated (via the National Culture Policy, for instance). Transparent as the clip was, it was

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<sup>28</sup> The same message was disseminated through other government campaigns, including yet another film-clip which featured a long footage of real-life scenes depicting the horrors of political upheavals (burning houses, women and children crying tears of anguish, and so forth). The clip ended with a plea to Malaysians that they did not to make the same mistake by voting for the opposition.

nonetheless successful in helping the regime win a new term in parliament – why? Imaginably, some would watch the film-clip, unreflexively identify with its interpellatory mandate and then proceed to act on it by gathering behind the regime. “See how literal they [the general population] have become?”, Maniam laments when the issue was raised in an interview (Lim 1999a). “That's naïve psychological exploitation. It works because that's the level at which we get people thinking in this country.”

Then there is a majority of practical solipsists who, although cynically cognisant of the ideological proposition's falsity, would not renounce it as such, thus perpetuating the power structures which oppress them. The refusal to act on the knowledge which the subject already possesses is precisely what Lacan means by misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). The subject misrecognises when he prevents himself from integrating into his belief system or from “knowing something that [he] knows or suspects but wants (at some level) to repress” (Alcorn 1994: 34). This to a large extent explains why the majority of centrist voters in Malaysia tend to be swayed by a regime's fantasy of peaceful coexistence. It allows them to unconsciously identify with an ideal through which they might appear likeable to themselves (‘decent, peace-loving folks’), as opposed to identification with an ideal which would, in the gaze of Authority, give them a bad conscience and negative self-image (‘fanatical, peace-wrecking traitors of the nation’).



The above cynical mode of ideology's functioning is distinguishable from what Peter Sloterdijk calls kynicism, "a popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm" (Žižek 1989: 29). To an extent, kynicism can be an effective mode of resistance. It embarrasses the regime by exposing its solemn ideological propositions as lies (albeit lies which the cynical subject at some level already recognises as lies). Often, however, the subversive potential of kynicism is already anticipated by the cynicism of the ruling culture. As illustration, an opposition party's unmasking of the government's lofty pre-election promises as hollow and manipulative may not necessarily lead to the latter's undoing. If kynical detractors openly decry the film-clip as ideological manipulation, others especially the aforementioned centrist subjects would only be too glad to resist knowing, just as they would pretend to not see that some hapless person is being mugged on the street. The lesson here is that to obtain the desired response from the politically-wooded subject, the opposition must also take into account the *jouissance* to which the subject is passionately attached. It must take into account of the fact that the subject may resist identification with certain values and ideas (regardless of their truth-content) that threaten the stability of his identity.

A way out of this deadlock may be found in social *over*identification, as opposed to *dis*identification. Žižek explains that the latter mode is "what holds a community together" (1999f: 267). It delegates "the members' hatred or love to



another agent *through whom* they love or hate.” When we express our love for our nation, for instance, we usually do it *symbolically*, through its agent, namely the government-as-institution. Whereas in overidentification, the subject will identify with the agent's avowed doctrine, party principles, etc., and take it so literally and zealously that the original intermediary agent cannot but appear as failing to live up to or as having betrayed what they preach. The subject as such hijacks the agent's discourse and turns him into the enemy of his own word. So, for example, instead of maintaining a cynical distance towards the official notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*, we should identify with it even more radically (for instance, by building a credible *multiethnic* oppositional force that will be strong enough to challenge the hegemonic bloc), to the point where the regime is ‘humiliated’ into honouring its word. Of course, overidentification can also work the other way and to catastrophic results. The long-standing rivalry between UMNO and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) is a case in point. In attempting to win Malay support, both parties have tried to displace one another as *the* party with the real interest of Malays at heart. PAS leaders denounce UMNO as corrupt, and leaders from the latter party counter by calling them misguided religious extremists while, at the same time, intensifying its Islamisation policies so as not to lose the support of its Muslim constituents to PAS. PAS then charges that UMNO lacks commitment to the Islamic-Malay cause, an accusation which rarely fails to rouse UMNO into a further frenzy of political Islamisation.

## Destination Bolehland

UMNO “ultras” or leaders with “keen ethnic motivations” (Case 1995: 97) from as far back as independence have consistently taken the untenable position of denying that the policy of Malay dominance is about “casting anyone in an inferior position” (Abdullah Ahmad, in Das 1987: 162) and, at the same time, rejecting the creation of a Malaysia society that does not discriminate between Malaysians “as a matter of right” and Malaysians “as a matter of hospitality” (Lee 1998: 624). According to Lee Kuan Yew, it was for that precise reason that Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. UMNO was determined to “maintain total Malay supremacy” (1998: 547). In parliament and to the international media, UMNO elites would say “*Yes, Malaysian Malaysia. Yes, we all agree* [to an inclusive nationhood ideal that is not identified with the supremacy, well-being and interests of one particular ethnic group at the expense of others]. *It is an old concept*” (Inche Senu, in Lee 1965b). But in their “private circuit” they would indulge in racist propaganda and aggressively stoke Malay hatred for ethnic Chinese. “Every time they (the United Malays National Organisation) wanted to have things their way in the Alliance, they used the threat: ‘blood will flow. The meaning is that our [‘chauvinistic’ Chinese] blood will flow’” (Lee 1965b: 18). When invited to discuss their differences rationally,

UMNO supporters shouted "*We are united, we are ready to die*" (Lee 1965b: 28).<sup>29</sup> The situation, according to Lee, was impossible:

Some people may wonder why it is that we are not just keeping quiet and allowing people to say what they like, such as 'Malays unite.' They shout this everywhere . . . Everyday they are pumping this out in Jawi [Arabic script]. I say people get worried. If among the Chinese you hear people say, 'Hokkiens unite', all the non-Hokkiens will say 'What is this all about? Is it to wallop the non-Hokkiens? So, when they say 'Malays unite,' we say 'What is this all about?' It is a fair question. (Lee 1965b: 17)

Relations between the two sides became even more strained when race riots erupted in Singapore in the years leading up to its secession from Malaysia. UMNO blamed the Singapore government, "depicting it as oppressing the Malays of Singapore" with the hope of frightening "those elsewhere in the Federation into rallying around UMNO for protection" (Lee 1998: 562). Lee's interpretation of events is backed by a report by the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur which states that communal tension "has been sharpened during the past few months by a propaganda campaign (conducted primarily by the leading Malay newspaper, *Utusan Melayu*) . . . *Utusan Melayu* often acts as a mouthpiece of

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<sup>29</sup> Although Lee Kuan Yew was writing about Malay 'ultras' of the late 1950s and early 1960s, his description is not inapplicable today. Only recently did Mohd Khir Toyo, the *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) of Selangor, warn non-Malays that Malays were "willing to bathe in blood" to protect Malay privileges (Ghani 2002).

UMNO, and in particular of its extremist secretary-general, Syed Ja'afar Albar" (1998: 565).

Contrary to popular acceptance, Singapore's secession in 1965 was not just about the excising of one tiny island and two million Chinese from Malaysia but effectively the abortion of *Bangsa Malaysia* in the making. One might say that something died that day but no one took proper notice until the first symptom erupted four year later. On 13 May 1969, Malays massacred several hundred ethnic Chinese during the race riots of 13 May 1969 at the instigation of Malay elites (Lee 1998: 642; Slimming 1969) or – in another version of the story – when Malays defended themselves against the Chinese who allegedly wanted all Malays to die and all aborigines to return to the jungle, as reported by the National Operations Council (1969: 29). Today Malaysia cannot be further from where its founding fathers envisioned it to be in the 1940s. Originally conceived as a progressive, democratic, tolerant, multi-religious, secular nation, it has over four decades of independence regressed into an Islamist *Bolehland* where 'everything also can' (Malaysian English for a land where 'everything is achievable/yours') if one has the right *kulitfication* ('skin qualification').



## **Part II**

**BEN OKRI**

### **The Abiku Trilogy**

Stories are always a form of resistance. (Okri 1996a)

## ***THE FAMISHED ROAD***

### **The Road to Nigeria**

To the Booker Prize judges who picked Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (*TFR*) as the winner in 1991, *TFR* was a "beautifully written and moving" novel which "convey[ed] *Nigerian* peasant life in a changing world." In the 1992 Vintage edition of the novel from which the preceding quote is taken, we find a similar view by another critic: "Okri's *Nigeria*, on the eve of independence, is a country where people commonly dream strange and sometimes important dreams . . . [*TFR* reads] like an epic poem" (emphases added, back-cover of *TFR*). Few indeed would disagree that *TFR* and by implication the two other abiku novels *Songs of Enchantment* (*SOE*) and *Infinite Riches* (*IR*) are directly or indirectly about Okri's homeland. Our reading will in fact be similarly premised – except that we do not take the Nigerian background as a given.

Several critics have rightly pointed out that the trilogy itself offers few certainties where the setting is concerned. We know that events unfold in an

African country that is about to achieve independence from colonial Britain. It may well be Nigeria but the word Nigeria never once appears in any of the three texts. There are numerous allusions to politico-historical events that closely correlate with actual developments in Nigeria: "coups and riots, tribal massacres and famine . . . explosions at oil sites, the genocide of war and decades of hardship to come" (*IR* 49). Yet no specific details and temporal indices are given. We are not told the names of the tribes "quarrelling with one another, disputing their myths of supremacy and their legends of the origin of all things" (*SOE* 20). And we cannot say with absolute certainty if the "genocide" in question is or is not an allusion to the Biafran war which we looked at in Chapter 2. There are a number of sociocultural references that are of Nigerian or at least West African origin. The calabashes of palm-wine, the *abiku* (Yoruba for 'spirit child'), the *egungun* procession and the everyday religious rituals are just some of more obvious ones. But the question remains: do these references necessarily mean that the novel is *about* Nigeria?

It is instructive to note that Okri's reluctance to commit to neither absolute fixity nor absolute unfixity is not just confined to the *abiku* trilogy. Going through his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, we will find that Nigeria is scarcely ever mentioned by name. Even on the few occasions that it is mentioned, Okri never discusses it as extensively and in quite the unequivocally 'angry' tone for which pioneer Nigerian writers like Achebe and Soyinka are renowned. Neither has his

writings demonstrated overt partiality to any party, tribe or geopolitical section of the country. In all, Okri has perhaps published but one piece of writing that directly engages with Nigerian politics. The work in question is 'The Catastrophe Now Facing Nigeria' (1994a), an essay written in response to the Nigerian political crisis resulting from the military proscription of the 1993 election results. "My country's choice", he writes, "is either democracy or the descent into chaos and civil war". Underscoring tribalism, the North-South divide and military dictatorship as key obstacles, he warns that "blood might again howl" unless "an intelligent and equitable solution is found." Apart from the essay, Okri has also paid particular attention to the themes of corruption, military brutality and nationhood in his novels, short stories, and poems. Most of these engagements, however, display little contextual specificity.

What are the implications of Okri's purging of definitive references to a particular nation in the trilogy? Does it, for instance, make him "more introspective, more personal, less historically ambitious [and] less radical, than Achebe and his peers", as Charles Nivens suggests (Hawley 1995: 37)? Leaving the second question aside for now, let us, by way of answering the first, recall certain remarks Okri has made on his strategy of contextual unfixity. In response to the question of how his work "reflects life in Nigeria", he says "the first thing I'd say is that I think it's important to understand that a piece of writing is, first of all, a piece of writing. By that I mean that one may be writing about Nigeria, but



that terrain may be the place in which one can best see very strong universal concerns" (Ross 1993: 337). On *TFR* specifically, Okri explains that the aim was to write an "unfixed book, a river" text that reflected the African aesthetic. He describes this aesthetic as "a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions", and as characterised by a boundless openness to endless possibilities and a celebration of riddles and paradoxes. Crucially, he says, any attempt to fix the aesthetic "too much within national or tribal boundaries" would only contradict the spirit of the work (Wilkinson 1992: 87-88).

Okri's strategy of contextual unfixity works hand in hand with what we might call his technique of 'narrative stealth' to circumvent interpretative closure. In a videotaped interview by Edward Blishen (1988), Okri remarks that people rarely want to know or read about their condition, to confront and vanquish the "ghosts and monsters that we all carry within us" or, in Dad's words, "the corpses in the consciousness of all peoples . . . things that weigh us down and drag us towards death and prevent us from growing" (*SOE* 289). That is why, Okri says, with certain works he finds it necessary to eschew social realism for what he calls "a deeper kind of realism" so as to lure readers into thinking that "they are reading about something else when in fact they are reading about themselves." Okri has articulated this notion of stealth in several of his essays including 'The Joys of Storytelling I':

Storytelling is always, quietly, subversive. It is a double-headed axe. You think it faces only one way, but it also faces you. You think it cuts only in one direction, but it also cuts you. You think it applies to others only, when it applies mainly to you. When you think it is harmless, that is when it springs its hidden truths, its uncomfortable truths, on you. It startles your complacency. And when you no longer listen, it lies silently in your brain, waiting. (1997b: 43)

What we have just seen should serve as caution against narrowly reading the abiku trilogy as just another story about Nigeria in search of nationhood, as if it is solely about 'their' (Nigerians, Africans) struggles and we are somehow outside the realm of the author's concern. To read the trilogy as such would be to miss the significance of its open-endedness and double-edgedness – two features that are central not only to Okri's design for the trilogy but also to his overarching philosophical vision which we will be mapping in the course of our discussion.

### **The First Day of Politics**

It is signalled early in *The Famished Road* (*TFR*), the first book of the abiku trilogy, that a momentous event of national proportions is about to take place. Independence is coming and the compound where Azaro, the spirit-child narrator, and his impoverished parents live is "afame with politics" (*TFR* 128). The day politics makes its first public appearance, the compound literally turns into "a

place of vomiting" (130), a ominous foreboding of things to come. Men, women and children who had earlier consumed the "rotten milk of politics" (132), distributed to the poor by the Party of the Rich to canvass their votes, are found retching and contorting in agony all over the compound as the poison courses through their system. Politics has well and truly arrived and according to Dad, Azaro's load-carrying father, it has "begun to spoil everything":

Now they want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load . . . If you want to vote for the party that supports the poor, they give you the heaviest load. I am not much better than a donkey. (*TFR* 81)

The dehumanisation and dispossession of the compound people progressively worsens as independence approaches. By the time we come to *SOE* and *IR*, they would have been reduced to "ghosts of history" (*IR* 228). As Azaro puts it:

We were the empty bodies on whose behalf the politicians and soldiers rule; we were not real. We could not communicate our desires save by the intensity of our cheering or hissing. We were shadows in the world of power; the mere spectators of phenomena, the victims of speeches. We were meant to listen, never to speak. We were not meant to feel or to think or argue or dissent. Assent was all we were good for. (*IR* 228-9)

*TFR* makes it clear that the nation is dying even before it is born, and that there is a political tug of war going on between the powerless but awakened few and those acting as “a braking-power on the awakening consciousness of the people” (Fanon 1990: 135). A “choice between living and dying” (Okri, in Wilkinson 1992: 84) has to be made. Will the nation work towards attaining a harmony of politics and heart and the realisation of its “fabulous possibilities” (*IR* 201), or will it alternatively persist as an eternal undead, tormented by immortality – in short, as an abiku nation?

### **Abiku Nation**

Before we proceed to unpack the idea of the abiku nation, it would be helpful if we first acquaint ourselves with the abiku as a sociocultural phenomenon and a literary trope in African literature. A Yoruba term, the *abiku* (or *ogbanje* in Igbo) is believed to be “part human and part spirit”, a liminal entity bound to the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth (Achebe 1986: 27). The word abiku literally means “born to die” (Bascom 1993: 35). In southern Nigeria where belief in the abiku is prevalent, it is said that before an abiku enters the phenomenal world, it will make a pact with its companions, promising to return to the spirit world on a predetermined date. It then spirits itself into its earthly mother’s womb in order to be born, live a short mischievous life and then will itself unto death before a full and natural life cycle is completed. The abiku then repeats the cycle, often



returning to the same hapless mother. The condition is a curse because it condemns the abiku to perpetually live out half an inconsolable life in the spirit-world and the conventional world. But it is a 'blessing' insofar as it affords the abiku terrible powers over its parents who live in constant fear of its early demise and return to the spirit-world.

The abiku is generally dreaded by the living and regarded as eccentric and/or mad because of its regular 'soliloquies', i.e. mysterious conversations with invisible spirit-friends. Often cantankerous, unpredictable and prone to fights, it is said to "collapse and if not attended to soon enough, die" when physically punished (Achebe 1986: 30-1). It is also perennially sickly and in need of medical attention. To sever the abiku's link to the spirit-world and bind it to its earthly home, sacrifices which often impoverish its family must be made. The abiku's magic token, usually buried in a remote area, must be found and destroyed. If the suspected abiku child dies within days of birth, its body is whipped and mutilated to deter its return. The body may be marked by shaving a spot on its head, cutting a notch in its ear, or severing a toe or finger (Bascom 1993: 35). Once in a while, an abiku may decide to renege on the promise to its companions in order to remain in the world of the living. When that happens, the abiku's spirit kin will attempt to lure it back home through persuasion or force. The latter involves making life as uncomfortable as possible for the abiku renegade.

The abiku phenomenon has inspired a range of African writers before Okri. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's handling of the abiku is "largely ethnographic" (Quayson 1997b: 123). His project is to "validate the coherence of Igbo beliefs and the efficacy of the structures built by the culture as security against the irrational". Soyinka's treatment of the same subject in his poem 'Abiku' is an "attempt to locate the organizing consciousness of the literary artefact within the realm of the spirit-world" (Quayson 1997b: 124). In the poem, insight into the abiku's mind comes directly from the abiku itself who mocks the living when offered supplicatory items:

In vain your bangles cast  
Charmed circles at my feet  
I am Abiku, calling for the first  
And the repeated time.

Must I weep for goats and cowries  
For palm oil and the sprinkled ash?  
Yams do not sprout in amulets  
To earth Abiku's limbs. (Soyinka 1967: 62)

In J.P. Clark's poem, also entitled 'Abiku', the perspective is reversed. The abiku does not speak but is spoken to by the persona who poignantly implores it to stay even though the proffered sacrifices amount to little compared to what it could enjoy in the spirit-world. Because the addressed abiku is silent,

the poem, according to Olatubosun Ogunsanwo, can at the most be said to register “Clark’s characteristically humanist outlook that allows the implied author to accept the abiku myth from the humane approach” (Ogunsanwo 1995: 47):

Then step in, step in and stay  
For her body is tired,  
Tired, her milk going sour  
Where many more mouths gladden the heart. (Clark 1967: 61)

Finally we come to Okri whose handling of the subject articulates “a particular perception of events . . . that brings the literary tradition into a direct engagement with the ambit of the socio-political while remaining steadfastly in the realm of the mythopoeic” (Quayson 1997b: 121). In the trilogy, we gain access not only to the precocious Azaro’s consciousness but also, by virtue of his role as the chief narrator, the trilogy’s universe, including how he is himself perceived by those around him. Against the standard approach, and notwithstanding the abiku’s tendency to upset “all kinds of balances” (*TFR* 5), Azaro and his abiku companion Ade are not mere sadistic spirits bent on bringing nothing but misery to their earthly parents. The first intimation of this is found early in *TFR* when Azaro says that abikus often “returned [to the spirit-world] inconsolable for . . . all the suffering they hadn’t redeemed” (3). Similar insights into the extra-traditional role of Okri’s abikus are found in *SOE*. To Azaro, Ade says that he “was born to love the world as [he finds] it. And to change it if [he]

can" (*SOE* 196). In a scene following his botched attempt to kill Madame Koto, Ade says that by failing he has fulfilled his destiny as catalyst: "The tears of a child dying of hunger in a remote part of the country can start a civil war. I am the tears of a child. I am the country crying for what is going to happen in the future" (*SOE* 195).

Like Ade, Azaro – superstitiously shortened from Lazaro by Mum because of its uneasy echo of Lazarus – is an abiku with a mission. The difference is that Azaro is an abiku who, according to a herbalist, "didn't want to be born, but who will fight with death" (*TFR* 8). Somewhere along the endless coming and going, he makes the momentous decision to commit to life. In doing so, he effectively forfeits the aquamarine paradise from where he originates, a "world of pure dreams" (*TFR* 4) where suffering does not exist and spirits bathe in the radiance of diverse rainbows. Interestingly, Azaro is not only fully aware of what he is leaving behind but also what is in store for him in the world of the living, namely "the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe" (*TFR* 3). Azaro's decision to make this 'terroristic' break has nothing to do with the usual earthly pleasures of "offerings of oils and yams and palm-nuts" or the "promises of special treatment" (*TFR* 5). As he says,



It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going . . . It may have also been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would be my mother. (*TFR* 5)

Described as a “lonely” child (*SOE* 5) with a “lonely heart” (*IR* 65) “wandering an unhappy world” (*IR* 217), Azaro is propelled in life by a melancholic longing for the mysterious sublimity of living. But why melancholy? Why is paradise insufficient? To answer these questions, it would be instructive if we first recall Žižek’s definition of melancholy as explicated in his critique of *Satyricon* (1969), a film by Italian director Federico Fellini. Based on Gaius Petronius’ first century Roman satire of the same name, *Satyricon* is about “a universe in which Christianity is yet to come, from which the notion of Christian redemption is totally absent” (Žižek 2000d: 88). Žižek writes that although the ancient Roman hedonistic figures do not know that salvation is coming, they already suffer from a “strange sadness, a kind of fundamental melancholy”. It is as if “they somehow already have the premonition that the true God will soon reveal Himself, and that they were born just a little too early, so that they cannot be redeemed.” The lesson to be derived from this, according to Žižek, is similar to the Hegelian dialectics of alienation:

We are not dealing with the Paradise which is . . . lost due to some fatal intrusion – there is already in paradisiacal satisfaction . . . something suffocating, a longing for fresh air, for an opening that would break the unbearable constraint; and this longing introduces in Paradise an unbearable Pain, a desire to break out – life in Paradise is always pervaded by an infinite melancholy. (2000d: 88)

The Roman figures' suffocation and longing for fresh air is not dissimilar to Azaro's experience prior to his (re)birth in *TFR*. For all the paradisiacal pleasures obtainable in the spirit-world, Azaro knows that so long as he is bound to the endless abiku cycle of coming and going, and committed to neither this nor that realm, he will be denied access to something greater. And it is because of this inkling of there being something greater out there to be experienced that Azaro makes the break. Against this background, Margaret Cezair-Thompson is justified in arguing that Azaro's decision to escape the "captivity or exile" of time (1996: 41) and to replace his "power to die with the power to live" (1996: 43) is a step in the right direction – albeit not a step *away* from exile since "To be born is to come into the world weighed down with strange gifts of the soul, with enigmas and an inextinguishable sense of exile" (*TFR* 5). This leaves us with the question of whether it is justified to argue, as Cezair-Thompson does, that because the abiku is symbolic of society's unreadiness or irresolution to live, Azaro's sudden steadfast commitment to life therefore parallels society's readiness to "move beyond [its] crippling historical-social conditions" (1996: 41)? Our answer is no.

Certainly, the abiku condition *is* symbolic of the nation's state of undeadness. As Dad himself discovers in the fevers of his dream, theirs is

a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (*TFR* 494)

However, Azaro's commitment to life cannot be said to reflect the nation's readiness to move forward for the simple reason that it is *not* ready to move forward. It is enough for now to recall that the nation is repeatedly described in the trilogy as "dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love [and] too many divisions" (*SOE* 91). If the abiku condition of coming and going is to be paralleled to the nation, it would be more appropriate to see it strictly in terms of the waxing and waning of the people's will to sustain the nation's birth and future flowering. Alternatively, the unborn nation may be compared with the twisted abiku triplets (emblematic perhaps of the three main ethnic communities in Nigeria) warring against each other in the pregnant Madame Koto's bloated stomach (*TFR* 464, 494). With regard to Azaro, it might be more appropriate to view him as symbolic of the "unbreakable things in us" (Okri, in Wilkinson 1992) or, in the context of the trilogy, the positive forces struggling to ensure that the nation not only lives but lives up to its potential.

## Logic of the (Im)possible

At the face of it, Azaro's volitional forfeiture of paradise and decision to face a life of hardship and lonely wandering in search of "the river of [his] destiny" (*TFR* 6) does admittedly seem somewhat masochistic. Why give up paradise for suffering, however sublime it might be? Why not eliminate suffering altogether? The answer, as will be elucidated, lies in the fact that the total elimination of suffering is, although necessary, simultaneously impossible and undesirable.

The logic of this Okrian proposition should already be familiar to us since it is essentially the same logic which, as discussed in previous chapters, regulates the Lacanian subject's impossible pursuit of completion, as well as the agent's pursuit of the impossible society in Laclau and Mouffe. If we recall, the Lacanian subject is by definition an empty nothing with an infinite craving for something. The subject (qua pure craving) believes that by possessing the lost object of his desire, his emptiness will be filled out and the state of ontological fullness will be attained. What he misrecognises is that no positive object is ever 'it', which is the same as saying that desire is inherently inextinguishable. 'It' which does not exist in materiality is designated *objet petit a* in Lacan, that is, the non-symbolisable surplus that sets the subject's desire in motion. In itself, *objet petit a* is literally 'nothing' and ultimately *the subject himself*. That is why, if and when the subject actually arrives at himself, what he will find is not the anticipated plenitude but its radical negation. The subject will find to his subjective obliteration that he is



neither the ego nor the unconscious but a pure nothingness devoid of any inherent meaning. So long as the subject misrecognises this and continues to postpone the moment when he actually 'catches up' with himself, he will continue to exist and pursue completion. In this precise sense, desire may be seen as the condition of possibility and impossibility for the realisation of the subject's completion.

In the same way, Laclau and Mouffe designate antagonisms as the condition of possibility and impossibility for the realization of a society from which antagonisms have been entirely eliminated. Antagonisms which threaten society's stability must be eradicated before a free society may be constituted. The complete eradication of antagonisms, however, can only result in society's disintegration since without an outlet for subordinated, oppressed and dominated communities to articulate and redress their problems, there can be no free society in the true sense of the word. Because of the paradoxical status of antagonism, the ideal (democratic) society is, like the Lacanian subject's desired fullness, an ideal that is a good only insofar as it cannot be reached.

For Okri, the same logic of the (im)possible is articulated in spiritual-aesthetic rather than psychoanalytic or politico-philosophical terms. In place of desire or antagonism, he places *suffering* at the heart of the logic. Okri acknowledges that suffering in its many forms (poverty, oppression, dislocation, exile, self-sabotage), depending on the intensity to which it is experienced, can

corrupt, break and/or destroy a person. Nevertheless, suffering – when it reaches the limit of human endurance and slides into the beyond – can also empower because it is “the thing in us which most makes the spirit wake up” (Okri, in Hattersley 1999). Also, he says,

Suffering drenches [the oppressed] in mystery. Intensities of existence accelerate their ageing. They mature more strangely and more deeply than their oppressors . . . They may be dwindling but it is precisely because of all they have suffered and are still suffering that they have much to struggle for, to be alive for. (Okri 1990)

In the *abiku* trilogy, suffering is the motivating force that pushes characters like Azaro and Dad to go beyond themselves and perform ‘impossible acts’ so as to eliminate the very suffering that drives them in the first place. In this sense, suffering (as a manifestation of what we lack) is what makes fullness or completion possible. (Without suffering, there would be no necessity to pursue fullness). Its final elimination is, however, undesirable since it will only bring about the exact opposite of what it promises to yield: a life of death-like ‘perfection’ which offers the subject neither reason nor drive to continually expand the boundaries of the possible. The secret here then is that the true aim of the pursuit of completion is not completion but *the pursuit itself*. It is through the pursuit precipitated by suffering that the “inner liberation” of the unsuspected powers of the human spirit may be achieved (Okri 1999b: 63).

To further illustrate the tension between the need to eliminate suffering and the need *for* suffering, let us turn to the scene in *TFR* where Azaro stumbles upon a community of dead beings in the interspatial no-man's-land. According to his three-headed spirit guide, these strange beings once lived for an eternity "as faces on the great tree" (*TFR* 329). One day, their prophet spoke of other "worlds of people high up", particularly a place called Heaven wherein resides a "great people who did not know their own greatness." The prophet urged his people to build a great road to Heaven so that "they could visit those people, and that those people could visit them. In this way, they would complete one another and fill an important destiny in this universe." The three-headed spirit explains that the prophet gave his people this sublime goal to work towards because they were – like Azaro prior to his rebirth – suffocating within the (en)closure of eternal placidity.

They wanted to live, to be more alive. They wanted to know the essence of pain, they wanted to suffer, to feel, to love, to hate, to be greater than hate, and to be imperfect in order to always have something to strive towards, which is beauty. They wanted also to know wonder and to live miracles. Death is too perfect. (*TFR* 329)

Driven by this goal, the prophet's people have been building the great road for two thousand years. What they do not "know", however, is that "the road cannot be finished" (*TFR* 329) and that arrival is impossible:

When they have built a long section of [the road], or forgotten the words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it, landquakes happen . . . the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into other things, or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they have built and a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage. (*TFR* 329-30)

The road-builders are unaware of the impossibility of completing their task not because they have not been told the truth. Rather, despite having been told the truth, they continue to misrecognise it in the Lacanian sense. They continue to act as if they do not know. As the prophet says, they are “deaf to the things they need to know the most” (*TFR* 330). The road-builders’ deafness to the truth and their resultant pursuit of Heaven perfectly parallels the Lacanian subject’s misrecognition of his constitutive lack and the impossible pursuit of himself. Without misrecognition, they would not have found it necessary or worthwhile to desire and pursue the impossible. Non-pursuit would mean that their very identity of the road-builders would be negated. They would literally cease to exist as road-builders and return to being “faces on the great tree”, frozen in death-like perfection. They would also be deprived of the opportunity they presently have as road-builders to explore their “capacity to create, to overcome, / To endure, to transform, to love, / And to be greater than [their] suffering” (Okri 1999b: 61).



In the same way that the Lacanian subject's failure to arrive at himself *is* his subjectivity, the road-builders' failure to reach Heaven (symbolised by the great unfinished road on which "all human beings travel" (*TR* 70)), *is* "their soul, the soul of their history" (*TFR* 329). And just as the subject's attainment of completion will result in his radical negation, the road-builders' 'arrival' at Heaven will lead to their annihilation. The logic of this ironic reversal of fortune is nicely captured in one of the stories Dad tells Azaro. Once upon a time, an African emperor ordered all the frogs in his kingdom to be exterminated because they were disturbing his sleep. The emperor's order was carried out and he was able to sleep serenely until "the mosquitoes, whose larvae the frogs fed on, came and spread disease. His people fled and what was once a proud land became a desert waste" (*IR* 131).

## **Desire to Drive**

The cycle of toil, arrival, destruction and fresh recommencement of toil that plots the existence of the road-builders – the 'cycle of life', as we may call it – is not unlike the 'abiku cycle' of birth, death and rebirth we discussed previously. The two cycles are identical in that they both mark the flow of life, the rise and fall or the coming and going of things and events. The crucial difference is that, unlike the cycle of life, the abiku cycle is a condition of bad infinity. Those fated (or fate themselves) to loop *ad infinitum* within its closed circuit do not actually undergo

any real change or achieve progress. For the doomed agents, the more things change, the more they remain the same. It is precisely from this strangulating condition of bad infinity that Azaro needed to escape in order to complete a natural cycle of life in the world of the living. It is also the same condition which qualifies the nation as an abiku nation, an obscene undead caught in a state of endless repetition and “arrested development” (Quayson 1995a: 157). As further illustrations of the eternal recurrence of the same, we might recall the road-builders’ original existence (immobilised as “faces on the great tree”) where life-quality was measured not by growth but stillness and stagnation. We might also recall the “strange kind of utopia” (*SOE* 115) Azaro discovers in the mind of the corrupt Party of the Rich’s masquerade, a sterile place like the road-builders’ old world where there is “no chaos, no confusion, no alternatives, no dialectic, no disturbances.”

In contrast to abiku the cycle of bad infinity, the cycle of life is first and foremost defined by its openness to growth. In concrete terms, it is the cycle of Azaro’s new life in the world of the living and the cycle into which the road-builders enter when they commence their pursuit of Heaven. (Heaven, which is populated by a “great people who did not know their own greatness” is ultimately the world of the living.) Another salient point we should underline here is that the cycle of life is not regulated by the Lacanian Big Other (also known as the ‘Other of the Other’ and ‘the subject supposed to know’), that is, the

ultimately non-existent Absolute Guarantor (Historical Necessity, Nature, and so forth) whom we presuppose as the One pulling the strings. *It is rather the agents themselves who, through their own actions, regulate it.* As we saw in the case of the road-builders, it is their own selves who predestine themselves. If at any time they choose to forget “the words of their prophet and [begin] to think they have completed” their task, everything will start to crumble. Until they ‘remember’, i.e. begin afresh the impossible journey to Heaven, they will not experience growth. And until they have endured enough suffering and accumulated enough wisdom to fully recognise the truth of life’s impossibility, they will not “become gods” (TFR 332).

In Okri, becoming a “god” is not about attaining absolute perfection. Rather it is about effecting a radical mental and attitudinal shift from misrecognition to *recognition* of the truth about the impossibility of Heaven and the *significance* of the impossibility. For the road-builders, it means recognising Heaven as a kind of Platonic ‘necessary lie’, an illusion “by which we can become / More real” (Okri 1999b: 3). It means recognising that although the *goal* is to arrive at Heaven and meet its inhabitants, the *aim* is to recognise themselves as the inhabitants of Heaven, that is, imperfect desiring beings who attain satisfaction by pursuing rather than arriving at themselves. Whereas ‘non-gods’ who, upon receipt of this truth, will abandon the aim (pursuit), “paralyse themselves with despair” or “poison themselves with emptiness” (1999b: 4),

Okri's "gods" will embrace the toil of overcoming oneself and the circular alternation of life's ascent and descent as the very reason to never stop pursuing the impossible goal.

The nuances of the shift from road-builder to god in Okri may be further teased out through Lacan's theory on the transformation of the subject of desire into the subject of drive. As we discussed in the Introduction, the subject of desire is by definition impossible. That is to say, although he desires the attainment of his unattainable goal (the sublime object, Heaven), he also desires his desire to remain unsatisfied. It is in this tension that the subject 'enjoys' himself. He experiences *jouissance* (enjoyment that comes at the cost of pain) not in the realisation of his goal but in the anticipation of its realisation. The subject of desire becomes a subject of drive when he crosses the "bridge of self-discovery" (ATG 30) and recognises the truth he has hitherto misrecognised. The crucial detail that sets subject of drive apart from subject of desire is that the former does not long for an object proper:

The object of the *drive coincides with the itinerary of the drive* . . .  
In other words, the object of the drive is not an object [that is] supposed to provide some satisfaction to the subject, but this satisfaction itself: the object of the drive is *satisfaction as object*.  
(Zupančič 2000: 142)



To further clarify the distinction between desire and drive, it would be useful to refer to Alenka Zupančič's comparison between two legendary seducers, Laclos' Valmont and Molière's Don Juan.<sup>30</sup> Valmont is a subject of desire. He sleeps with a succession of women in order to save himself from falling in love with any of them. By avoiding love, Valmont believes he will be able to maintain the very gap between himself and love which makes desire possible. Having a succession of lovers is his way of reproducing desire. Don Juan, on the other hand, seduces all kinds of women regardless of age, size, colour and background – not because he has a preference for a variegated menu but because he is indifferent to difference (Zupančič 2000: 131). For Don Juan, “each and every woman *is* the right one, and what drives him further is not what he did not find in his previous lover, but precisely what he *did* find”. He “attains satisfaction precisely in so far as his aim is nothing but ‘getting back into circulation’” (2000: 136). Okri's god is similar to Don Juan (qua subject of drive) insofar as his aim is not to arrive but rather to ‘enjoy’ himself by transcending his self-limitations within the cycle of life. For him, the impossibility of arriving *is* the very condition of possibility for infinite self-transcendence.

Although Okri does not explicitly articulate it in psychoanalytic terms, the notion of ‘traversing the fantasy’, of seeing “things as they really are” (ATG 49) is

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<sup>30</sup> Valmont is the protagonist in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' eighteenth century French novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* ('Dangerous Liaisons'), while Molière's version of the infamous 'Seducer of Seville' is found in his play *Don Juan or the Statue of the Feast*.

clearly a pivot in the abiku trilogy and almost all his publications since *TFR*. It is in *ATG*, though, through a plot that almost parallels the road-builders' impossible pursuit of Heaven, that the theme receives its most thorough treatment.<sup>31</sup> A brief discussion of *ATG* at this point would therefore be useful. *ATG* narrates the life and quest of a nameless protagonist who is searching for himself. The protagonist is literally invisible. His literal invisibility did not disturb him (since he was unaware of it) until he was sent to school where he discovered that neither him nor his people exist in "all the history books he read" (*ATG* 3). This new knowledge which introduces a lack in him sets him off on a quest for the secret of visibility. After seven years of endless searching, the protagonist arrives on a magical island-utopia inhabited by the Invisibles, a community of invisible beings who are simultaneously "masters of the art of transcendence" and "masters of suffering" (*ATG* 9). Through them the protagonist learns how to see the same truth that the road-builders in *TFR* have to recognise before godhood may be attained. The truth is that the true aim of his quest is not visibility (perfection, arrival) but a higher invisibility, a "journey towards perfection [that] is continued without any hope of ever arriving" (109).

The Invisibles have long known the truth that is the logic of the impossible. Their achievement has not come easy, as explained by one of the

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<sup>31</sup> See Lim (1996) for a detailed analysis of Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*.

Invisibles to the nameless protagonist. "It has taken us much suffering, much repetition of our suffering, much stupidity, many mistakes, great patience, and phenomenal love to arrive at this condition" (*ATG* 53). As gods, they fully recognise "the great laws [guiding] the rise and fall of things" (53). They know that as soon as they forget the lessons they have learned through much suffering, their island-utopia will disintegrate. Knowledge of this 'horrific' truth does not cripple or turn them into "god-like monsters" (Okri 1999b: 13) because they recognise that its disintegration is "an illusion, an excuse" to re-learn the truth and to continue scaling "higher and hidden levels" of invisibility (*ATG* 53).

### **Political Strong Poet**

In the preceding sections, we have seen how suffering might serve as a catalyst for self-liberation. The idea might seem more spiritual than political. But look deeper and we will find that the spiritual in Okri is no less than an aesthetically-encoded articulation of the radically political. To explain what we mean by this, let us first retrace our argument so far. We began with a political tug of war taking place at the heart of the unborn nation. On the one side are forces bent on aborting the nation, and on the other, there are those like Dad fighting to keep it alive. It goes without saying that in a situation where the odds are weighed heavily against the latter, it will be infinitely easier for those situated on the wrong side of politics to look at their condition with despair and to accept their fate as empty bodies on

whose behalf the politicians and soldiers rule – or worse, join the dark side the way Madame Koto does, the barwoman who because of greed turns into “the GREAT WHORE OF THE APOCALYPSE” (*TFR* 377). Alternatively, the downtrodden may take the infinitely more rigorous path which leads not to the dead-end of hope but to endless possibilities. These two divergent paths are similar to those available to Azaro and the road-builders. One leads to stagnation, the other leads to godhood. The simple fact that there *is* a choice is in itself already proof that destiny is not externally predetermined but is the direct result of one’s wilful attempt to transcend the limitations one inherits. If nothing is predestined, then destiny can only ultimately be self-authored:

If people think that God or Nature has made the world as it is, they will tend to consider their fate inevitable. But if the Being of the world that they inhabit is only the result of the contingent discourses and vocabularies that constitute it, they will tolerate their fate with less patience and will stand a better chance of becoming *political* ‘strong poets.’ (Laclau 1991: 97)

Like Lacan’s subject of drive, Laclau’s political strong poet – also referred to as the “exclusive author of the world” (1991: 97) and “constructor of the world” (1990: 189) – is not dissimilar to Okri’s god. The three are in a sense one and the same. To be either one of them is to have traversed the fantasy and adopted an attitude of thought that rejects closure (of which predestination is a



prime example) for the endless journey towards “the freeing of human beings through a more assertive image of their capacities” (Laclau 1991: 98).

In equating destiny with agency, and in placing agency back within the self, Okri already departs quite radically from the standard indigenous African conception of predestination. In Yoruba and Igbo cosmology, destiny is always-already set before re-birth. It is believed that before a person is born, the soul will meet with God (Olorun, the Yoruba Sky God and God of Destiny; Chi Ukwu, the Igbo Supreme God). The soul is then given the opportunity to finalise its destiny or ‘lifeplan’ (*ori* in Yoruba, *chi* in Igbo) which encompasses lifespan, identity, attributes and talents, including the manner in which it wishes to utilise these qualities (Achebe 1986: 18; Lawson 1984: 68). The entire process is highly complicated. Not only must the soul debate the merits and limitations of his aspirations with its spiritual double (its alter-ego or ancestral spirit who resides in heaven) in order to win its support and approval, it also has to present a reasonable and detailed request to God in a humble manner or risk having it rejected (Achebe 1986: 20; Bascom 1993: 34). Once the terms are agreed upon and the contract is sealed, the soul is re-born. Upon birth, memory of its *ori* is erased. The ‘amnesiac’ has to then rediscover the river of its destiny, often through consultation with the divining oracle (Lawson 1984: 68).

Although destiny is preordained before birth, it is not entirely unchangeable. The individual's lifespan may not be extended but it may be shortened by suicide, human acts and curses of offended deities or evil magic by one's enemies. Similarly, the blessings of one's *ori* cannot be increased but may be 'spoilt', reduced through witchcraft or when certain taboos are not observed. Should a bad or incompatible *ori* be chosen, or if the spiritual double refuses to endorse the *ori*, the individual will be unlucky in life. Not only will bad things come to him, he will also bring bad luck to his relatives and associates. A person with a good *ori* will, on the other hand, find good things coming to him with less effort. This is not to say he will automatically receive all the blessings of a good *ori*. He is still required to work hard to bring the potentialities of his *ori* to fruition (Abimbola 1994: 112). As the upper limit of the good and the bad are unalterably fixed, the most a person with a bad *ori* can do is make continuous traditional sacrifices to ancestral spirits and deities so that his bad *ori* may be prevented from fully realising itself. A person with a good *ori*, on the other hand, can aim to cultivate a good character and work towards realising his potential for success as well as to protect his *ori* from spoilage by performing sacrifices.

Here then lies the key difference between Okri's and the traditional conception of destiny. Although the latter is a "combination of predestiny and free will" (Abimbola 1994: 115), the upper limit to which an individual may liberate himself is always-already irrevocably decided by his *ori*. This in contrast to Okri

for whom destiny is contingent upon the active pursuit of destiny – which is the equivalent of saying that destiny is constituted by the subject himself. Notice that Okri neither fully abjures the African belief system nor fully embraces it. What he does is adapt aspects of indigenous beliefs including the abiku logic into his worldview which he defines as his “own philosophy, but part of the African aesthetic” (quoted in Hattersley 1999). Okri’s recasting of the African belief system is one of the reasons why we insist on a metonymic rather than a literal linking of the abiku trilogy to Nigeria. The universe of the texts does not always faithfully reflect the actual Nigerian lifeworld. Despite the many parallels between the two, subtle but crucial variances are always present in the former.

### **Dad the Kynical Hero**

The political strong poet in Okri is not a deluded optimist whose life is emblematic of the timeworn expression, ‘hope (for the good life) springs eternal.’ Certainly, hope is in the equation but it is not “something one should *put* in there; it’s something that emerges out of the sheer necessity of its place in the pantheon of human survival and the human spirit” (Okri, in Falconer 1997: 49). Furthermore, Okri says:

One should be very, very serious when one is going to talk about hope. One has to know about the very hard facts of the world and one has to look at them and know how deadly and powerful they

are before one can begin to think or dream oneself into positions out of which hope and then possibilities can come. (Wilkinson 1992: 88)

Living alertly and rigorously without the crutches of illusions is, in Okri, the hallmark of godhood – illusions here designating, firstly, the comforting fictions we tell ourselves in order to avoid confronting the “ghosts and monsters that we all carry within us” (Okri, in Blishen 1988), and secondly, the Big Other to whom we surrender responsibility for ourselves because it is easier to be a victim of bad infinity than to be a self-responsible strong poet. Needless to say, until more of us rid ourselves of illusions, there will always be more victims than heroes. Laclau concedes that the “hero of the new type” is rare. Its creation, however, is “absolutely necessary if our time is going to live up to its most radical and exhilarating possibilities” (Laclau 1991: 98).

The new hero may be rare but one is already in the making in the *abiku* trilogy. Unlike the many faceless compound cynics, Azaro’s father, Dad, has neither inhibitions when it comes to renouncing society’s hypocrites nor tolerance for the artificial limitations imposed on him by ‘fate’ and ‘the system’. Dad – like Diogenes of Sinope (the Greek proto-kynical philosopher) and Till Eulenspiegel (the fourteenth-century German peasant clown) – draws no boundary between theory and praxis. Being wretchedly poor and illiterate does not stop him from being



an enlightener of the crude sort who is not intimidated even by trashings . . . He embodies a robust intelligence that does not censor its impulses. He stands, like all kynics, halfway between the impudent and the spontaneous, between the naïve and the artful, and because he oscillates so ambivalently between honesty and nastiness with his vulgar assent, conventional morality does not have an easy time with him. (Sloterdijk 1987:142)

In addition to possessing the above kynical characteristics, Dad is also a feared and fearless boxer, with a powerful and masculine physique to boot. With this unwieldy combination of irrepressible cynicism and killer fists, Dad quickly becomes a headache for the self-assured political swindlers who feign respectability – similar to the way in which Diogenes stumped Athenian elites when he demonstrated “Plato’s subtle theory of eros by masturbating in public” (Sloterdijk 1987: 101), or when he went about the streets with a lantern during the day claiming to be looking for an honest man but never finding one.

The *abiku* trilogy provides countless examples of Dad’s kynical bite. Consider Dad’s unrestrained treatment of his creditors in *TFR*. The incident follows a feast thrown by Mum and Dad to celebrate Azaro’s safe return from one of his many solitary wanderings. Soon after the party, creditors who had earlier joined in the merry-making start demanding payment for the loan Dad had taken to purchase more drinks for the party guests (including, ironically enough, the creditors themselves). Failing to extract money from Mum, they throw stones at

her and subsequently seize the family's furniture in Dad's absence. Upon learning what the creditors have done, Dad goes into a rampage and sends the guilty parties scurrying for cover with the roar of his voice:

They are hiding now behind their wives' wrappers and yet in broad daylight they THREATENED my WIFE and SON and STOLE ALL MY THINGS! They are RATS COWARDS THIEVES AND ROGUES. Let them come out and DENY it! (*TFR* 97)

Two community elders emerge to calm Dad but they are rebuffed. A husband and wife couple is heard quarrelling somewhere in the compound. After a moment of silence, a door opens and one of the creditors tiptoes out to return an item he had stolen from Mum. When he tries to slink home, Dad appears and gives him an earful: "Money will kill you," Dad said. "You drank of my beer, ate of my food, and because of a small amount of money you behave like a rat?" (*TFR* 98) What Dad finds offensive is the creditors' lack of community spirit and bared-faced thievery, even if he did make the mistake of borrowing from them. (As we shall see, Dad is something of a community conscience and a "doctor of society" (Sloterdijk 1987: 162) whose mad voice and "crude eloquence" (*TFR* 24) upsets the compound people because it disturbs their fantasy of being helpless casualties of oppression.) As further illustration of Dad's kynicism, consider how he demonstrates that "the head has not only ears to hear and obey but also a brow with which to menacingly defy the stronger" (Sloterdijk 1987: 103). Dad, it

should be remembered, "has got a strong head" (*TFR* 407). When interrogated by thugs from the Party of the Rich about the party he supports, he tells them to mind their own business. Pressed for an answer, he tells them bluntly that he does not support their party because "it is a party of thieves" (*TFR* 255).

Dad is not the only poor man contemptuous of the Party of the Rich. The compound people are no strangers to the ways of the party which once, to great comical effect, let slip the truth through the loudhailer: 'WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE BRING YOU ELECTRICITY AND BAD ROADS, NOT GOOD MILK. I MEAN GOOD ROADS, NOT BAD MILK' (*TFR* 153). Few of them, however, rarely ever risk standing their ground and publicly opposing the party thugs. Their apprehension is not without reason. Although they may not fully fathom the sweeping changes politics has brought to the country, they are more than acutely aware that the brave are liable to end up badly beaten or dead, as Ade's carpenter father discovers a little too late when he is killed and left to rot in the open. Terrorised into submission, some of them have learned that, for the reason of self-preservation, it would be safer to tolerate tyranny, support the party they cannot oppose and reap the rewards of patronage while at it. As a direct consequence of the way they *act* rather than what they think or know, the politicians' "manufactured" (*TFR* 494) reality which the cynics are cynical about becomes further reinforced and therefore more real. This, despite the ironic distance they continue to maintain towards the 'false' reality imposed on them by



rival political parties. In a perverse way then the cynics get precisely what they seek: *self*-preservation, that is, the preservation of their identity as political victims.

Dad, on the other hand, is consistently portrayed throughout the trilogy as a fiercely proud man whose most glaring faults are, from the standpoint of the Party of the Rich, his obstinate refusal to be bought and his insistence on saying all kinds of politically seditious things. When the women at Madame Koto's bar talks about the infinite wealth and power that the people will receive from the Party of the Rich, Dad silences them with "Rubbish!" (*TFR* 296). And when the landlord threatens to increase the rent if he does not vote for the Party of the Rich, Dad provocatively goes around the compound telling everyone that he "wouldn't vote for the landlord's party" even "if they killed him" (*TFR* 203). Fearing the pricked-up ears of the landlord's spies, Mum tries without much success to get Dad to tone down his views. In his usual dramatic vein, he announces, "What right has the landlord to bully us, to tell us who to vote for, eh? Is he God? Even God can't tell us who to vote for. Don't be afraid. We may be poor, but we are not slaves."

Although Dad is resolutely against the Party of the Rich, he is not unaware of the rot in the Party of the Poor, the party he supports. When Ade's carpenter father tries to convince Dad that the Party of the Poor is "as corrupt as everyone



else", Dad replies, "Still, I support them. At least they don't spit on us . . . at least they think of the ordinary hard-working man" (*TFR* 211-2). He is, however, to learn the full extent of the Party of the Poor's treachery in *SOE*. After Ade's rampaging father is murdered by Madame Koto's thugs from the Party of the Rich, the Party of the Poor astonishes everyone by decreeing that "no one in the area must bury the corpse . . . unless they were the murderers" (*SOE* 247). By using the corpse as political capital against the former party, the Party of the Poor has committed a 'spiritual' crime against Ade's father. This is because in African indigenous belief, "a person whose dead body is not buried, that is, with due and correct rites, will not be admitted to the abode of the blessed departed ones, and therefore will become a wanderer, living an aimless, haunting existence" (Idowu 1973: 174). Since no one from the compound wants to be accused of being a murderer, the body remains unburied, rotting near the bushes. Their inaction literally condemns the spirit of Ade's father to wander aimlessly until Dad, defying the Party of the Poor's decree, gives the body a proper burial. Dad's heroic action is to earn him jail time in *IR*.

In the trilogy, Dad is portrayed as neither a superhero immune to the stings of suffering nor a joyless moralist who sees evil everywhere. His characterisation is much more multifaceted than one would normally expect from a figure whose name (or rather namelessness) 'Dad' is suggestive of a cardboard everyman. We see how fragile he can be when Mum nearly dies during an illness. He loses his

bearing and combative fervour, and turns into "a giant who was lost" (*TFR* 58). In *SOE*, he becomes "a giant destroyed by the sun" (*SOE* 34) when Mum abandons him because of his demon-incited lust for Helen, "a stinking beggar girl with a goat's eye" (*SOE* 16). In his lighter moments, however, Dad can be affably mad. In an earthy and sensuous way, he displays a robust sense of the ridiculous, an amusing trait which Azaro appears to have inherited. Recall for instance Dad's child-like gregariousness at the thanksgiving party for Azaro. To the cheer of an appreciative crowd, Dad, with an eagle feather stuck out from the back of his bandaged head, jokes, tells riddles, falls into impersonations, dances, beats a tune out of a bottle and sings in a powerful voice to the music of his invention. At one point, when the women are singing in their village choir voices, Dad mischievously taps at his glass with a spoon and spoils the women's rhythm (*TFR* 41-4). For all his kynical fire and child-like mischievousness, Dad is at heart a poet-philosopher who knows too well the "very hard facts of the world" (Okri, in Wilkinson 1992: 88). In what is arguably one of the most poignant, life-affirming moments in *TFR*, Dad implores to Azaro who is, having willed himself to die, a breath away from completely exiting the world of the living:

My son, my only son . . . We are poor. We have little to give you, but our love. You came out of our deepest joy. We prayed for you. We wanted you . . . You have wept for us and watered the tree of love. We have suffered for you. Suffering is our home. We did not make this strange bed that we have to sleep on. But this world is

real. I have bled in it. So have you . . . We are the miracles that God made to taste the bitter fruits of time. We are precious, and one day our suffering will turn into wonders of the earth . . . Do you not see the mystery of our pain? That we bear poverty, are able to sing and dream sweet things. (*TFR* 337-8)

Aside from revealing the poetic dimension of Dad's character, the melancholic entreaty also plays an obvious but crucial narrative function of bringing Azaro back from near-death, which in turns allows us uninterrupted access to the narrative universe in the trilogy. Just as important to note about Dad's supplication is the consummate optimism of his vision for the future. It is the same kind of optimism that Dad attempts to instil in others from the compound with irrepressible fervour so that they too can perceive political possibilities in impossibilities:

We must take an interest in politics . . . We must look at the world with new eyes. We must look at ourselves differently. We are freerer than we think . . . Human beings are gods hidden from themselves. (*TFR* 498)

If the way in which Dad articulates his political imaginings is 'insane', the content of the vision is even more so. To the bewilderment of those around him, Dad proposes that mosquitoes be trained as international spies, and flies as messengers (*SOE* 122). Less outrageously, he conjures an image of a country in

which everyone will receive the highest education, with music and mathematics as compulsory subjects (*TFR* 409). He vows to build universities for beggars and proposes that the people be taught, among other things, the art of concentration and the numerous philosophies of the land. As well, he plans to introduce special taxes on illiterates (*SOE* 122). Dad's imaginings may be silly and humorous but the humour is nonetheless serious because, as Edna Aizenberg notes, it "affirms the power of [the] mind to stretch, to assume responsibility, and to effect change" (1995: 29).

Although the idea of performing the impossible ("redreaming the world", as Dad puts it) is, theoretically speaking, minimally plausible, we cannot ignore the fact that Dad garners little support for his political vision. Neither can it be said that he manages to get the compound people to traverse their fantasy and see themselves as political strong poets. Still, to apply the lesson we have learned on suffering and the infinite wealth one can draw from it, would it not be more appropriate to read Dad's low rate of conversion as an indication of the vast success waiting for him?

### **Belief before Belief**

The dilemma Dad faces in convincing others to subscribe and to actively *live* the belief in possibilities in impossibilities lies in the fact that no 'hard proof' can be



produced to substantiate the truth of the belief. For that reason, Dad is viewed as a dreamy buffoon by those whose welfare he ‘dementedly’ tries to uplift. His inextinguishable optimism reminds us of Okri, whose writings demonstrate remarkable optimism in humanity’s immense possibilities despite the “enshrined injustices of the world” (*TFR* 3). Although there is no ultimate guarantee to the truth of his belief, Okri continues to hold that there is an “immutable star” within us, a forgotten capacity to “give birth to [our] true self” (*TFR* 488). Okri has consistently returned to this central notion in all his writings from *TFR* onwards. In the poem ‘Time to be Real’, for instance, he lyricises the passing from “The illusion of our lesser selves / To the reality of our greater selves”, the latter described as:

What we sometimes suspect we are  
What we glimpse we are when in love  
Magnificent and mysterious beings  
Capable of creating civilisations  
Out of the wild lands of the earth  
And the dark places in our consciousness. (Okri 1999b: 4-5)

Like Dad’s ideas, Okri’s ideas are often regarded by detractors as unintelligible and/or dreamy (Hattersley 1999; Adil 1995). This is not unexpected since, in this age of diffuse cynicism and transgressive excesses where most things have lost their shock value, there are arguably few left who, having been “schooled in reality”, would allow themselves to believe in something as ‘naïve’

as Okri's notion of the immutable star, lest they be "taken for suckers" (Sloterdijk 1987: 5-6). Still, from Okri's point of view, this does not detract from the misrecognised reality of our greater selves. That is to say, it is precisely because cynicism is so pervasive that our consciousness has become "humiliated" to the point where we overlook our inner capacity to go beyond ourselves (Okri 1999b: 5).

Convincing the cynic of the existence of his greater self requires more than 'hard proof', in the same way that it takes more than rational argumentation to convince a racist to give up his racist beliefs, or an infidel to embrace Islam, Christianity, and so forth. That is because Okri's immutable star is not an object that exists in materiality, unchanging in essence, and lying romantically dormant within each of us. Rather, *it is real only if we first act as if it is real*. To explain this paradox of "belief before belief"<sup>32</sup> (Žižek 1989: 40), we first need to examine the logic of belief. From the psychoanalytic standpoint, we do not believe in something after we are convinced by some infallible proof of its truth. We find reasons attesting to our belief *because* we already believe without being conscious that we hold that belief (1989: 37). Belief is independent of knowledge; it only needs to presuppose that its guarantor ('hard proof', confirmatory knowledge) is 'out there' even though "this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never

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<sup>32</sup>The notion of 'belief before belief' may be traced to the Christian thought of St. Augustine: *crede ut intelligas* ('believe in order to understand').

present *in persona*” (Žižek 1997a: 108). Proof of our belief, however, is always-already exteriorised, borne witness by our actions. As Žižek puts it, belief is “radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective” customs that we follow (1989: 34). The fact that we follow a custom is already proof of our inner belief in the authority of that custom. This remains true even if the custom remains incomprehensible to us or if we continue to maintain a cynical distance towards it. The implication here is not that our factual behaviour directly conditions the content of our belief. Rather, our external activity is that which provides material support for our belief. If and when we become conscious of the belief, the conversion would merely be a “formal act by means of which we recognize what we have already believed” (1989: 40). The radical exteriority of the unconscious is similarly discernible in the domain of politics. Recall as previously discussed that the subject is seized by ideology precisely when he *acts* as if he does not know the falsity of the ideological proposition, as if it is possible to escape interpellation simply by maintaining a cynical distance towards the ‘false’ ideology.

Here we can already appreciate why in Okri the “immutable star” or the “greater self” is real only if we first *act* as if (we believe) it is real. By unquestioningly submitting ourselves to the belief (as Dad does, as we shall see) and by imitating the ways of those who have ‘moved mountains’, belief will come by itself and along with it positive effects that could only have materialised

through belief. The procedure is not as strange as it may sound. Recall the road-builders' metaphoric pursuit of their greater selves which Okri depicts as a pursuit of Heaven. The road-builders 'know' that Heaven does not 'really' exist. But because they continue to presuppose its existence and act as if Heaven not only exists but is within reach, they already 'objectively' believe. This remains true irrespective of what they consciously know or think is the significance of their pursuit. If and when the road-builders recognise the truth of the impossibility of their pursuit, the conversion would merely be a formal act of giving a name to what they have unconsciously believed in all along: the existence of their greater selves.

### **The Authentic Act**

On Okri's notion of the greater self, we could say that its actualisation requires a certain blind faith on the part of the subject and, more importantly, a leap of faith. All leaps of faith (ventures into the feared unknown) involve a minimum of risk (of bringing about some major catastrophe as a result of the transgression). From within the horizon of what precedes the leap, the leap "always and by definition appears as a change 'from Bad to Worse'" (Žižek 1999f: 377). In the face of this, the "proper heroism" is not to hold on to the Bad but to fully assume the Worse. The flamenco dancer in Okri's essay 'Beyond Words: A Secular Sermon' (1996a) clearly exemplifies the 'terrorism' of the act. Wounded by someone who alluded



that she has no *duende* ('fire'), the dancer knows "she has to dance her way past her limitations, and that this may destroy her forever. She has to fail, or she has to die." With ritual slowness, she begins her dance, stamps fire into her loins and takes herself apart before the audience's sceptical gaze:

She is disintegrating, shouting and stamping and dissolving the boundaries of her body. Soon she becomes a wild unknown force, glowing in her death, dancing from her wound, dying in her dance.

And when she stops – strangely gigantic in her new fiery stature – she is like one who has survived the most dangerous journey of all.  
(Okri 1996a: 10)

The outcome of heroism is always radically undecidable. The flamenco dancer, for example, does not know if she will succeed in surpassing herself and, in doing so, prove her critics wrong. It is very possible that she might fail. If she does, her credibility will be irreparably damaged. Fully aware of the risk, she nonetheless decides that she cannot not do it. She starts off slowly and in no time blazes as if 'something in her more than her' has suddenly seized control to propel her to a new level of the possible.

The flamenco dancer's performance is what Žižek would term an "authentic act" (1999f: 374). An authentic act is not just any action performed to achieve or avoid something. It is rather an act that "unexpectedly 'just occurs' . . .

(after an authentic act, my reaction is always ‘Even I don’t know how I was able to do that, it just happened!’)” (1999f: 375). The paradox is that although the act is not intentional in the usual sense of being consciously willed, “it is nevertheless accepted as something for which its agent is fully responsible – I cannot do otherwise, yet I am none the less fully free in doing it” (1999f: 376). Furthermore, the act, if successful, always leads to a ‘miraculous’ symbolic death and rebirth. Okri’s flamenco dancer blazes into a “new fiery stature . . . shining in celebration of her own death” (Okri 1996a: 10), in the same way that the Lacanian subject of desire transforms into the subject of drive, recreated *ex nihilo*, when he traverses his fantasy. The lesson here applies equally to Okri’s politics and the result is the same in that it leads to a radical rewriting of the rules of the game. The act

redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe, appears to be ‘impossible’, yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility). (Žižek 2000a: 121)

In *TFR*, the main agent of the authentic act is, unsurprisingly, Dad. Encouraged by the countless number of political thugs and creditors he has frightened off with his fists, Dad – who used to box and wrestle before moving to the city ghetto – decides to embark on a side-career in boxing to make some money from bets. Calling himself Black Tyger, Dad starts to train dementedly. It

is during one of his solitary training sessions that he performs his first of three authentic acts in *TFR*. Out of the darkness of the night, a man who goes by the name of Yellow Jaguar emerges to challenge Dad. (Dad is to later realise that Yellow Jaguar is the spirit of a famous boxer who died three years ago.) Black Tyger accepts the challenge and they fight, raining blows on one another and falling into puddles. Towards the end, Dad is pulverised, crushed “with an avalanche of ceaseless punches” from his opponent (*TFR* 356). Just when defeat appears imminent, something unexpected happens:

Dad rose miraculously in stature. And with all the concentrated rage and insanity of those who have a single moment in which to choose between living and dying, Dad broke the chains of exhaustion and thundered such blows on the man as would annihilate an entire race of giants. (*TFR* 357)

Unable to withstand the blows, Yellow Jaguar crumbles and promptly disappears into the earth. Victory leaves the seriously wounded Dad in a state of subjective and physical destitution. He literally loses himself in “agony and amnesia” (*TFR* 359). Like “the biggest newborn baby in the world”, he has to be fed pap. He drools, farts indiscriminately and sleeps “like a baby”. But on the seventh day he makes a miraculous recovery. He is reborn with “fresh energies”, “interesting powers and a kind of madness” (*TFR* 364).

If Dad's first symbolic death and rebirth gives him a burning new enthusiasm to train harder, his second (following an authentic act performed during a boxing match with the menacing Green Leopard) transforms him on a deeper level. As if the fight had "dislodged something in his brain", Dad starts to talk about "becoming a politician and bringing freedom and prosperity to the world and free education to the poor" (*TFR* 408). With unselfconscious exuberance, he goes around the compound in earnest to canvass support, persisting even when he is verbally abused and doors are slammed in his face. Despite his illiteracy, books become a new priority. In his speeches, visions of political miracles are conjured and the people chastised "for not thinking for themselves", for their "sheep-like philosophy, their tribal mentality, their swallowing of lies, their tolerance of tyranny, [and] their eternal silence in the face of suffering" (*TFR* 420). Because of his enhanced determination in fighting "the threatening extinction that poverty and injustice" brings, Dad (Black Tyger) has been compared to the Yoruba gods, Shango and Ogun (Quayson 1995b, 1995a). The former is the feared god of thunder who "when he spoke, fire came out of his mouth" (Bascom 1993: 44). Ogun, on the other hand, stands for "justice, the justice of the gods and the justice required in human action" (Lawson 1984: 62).

If Dad's second transformation (authentic act, symbolic death, recreation *ex nihilo*) brings about a conversion whereby he formally becomes the political



strong poet he has always informally been since his early days as a headstrong kynic, the third marks his ultimate traversal of fantasy and the transformation of the kernel of his being. Destroyed and bed-ridden for days after a near-fatal duel with “the man in a white suit”, Dad suddenly arises “from the bed as from death” (*TFR* 497). With his wounds healed, despair deepened, and spirit strengthened, Dad is no longer the same man: “I am converted – I am blinded – I am beginning to see” (*TFR* 499). (This, as we will subsequently see in *SOE*, is to lead to the crystallisation of his hitherto scattered and partially-formed political vision for the liberation of Africa.) Thereafter, the beggars Dad previously adopted as his “world constituents” (*TFR* 419) become even more central to his politics. They are fed, looked after and promised social upliftment through education so that they would no longer be deceived and treated like children by powerful people (*SOE* 8). Dad gets so carried away by his obsession with the beggars’ welfare that his own family is neglected and Mum, exasperated beyond words, is (temporarily) given into Madame Koto’s circle of influence.

Dad’s irrational act bears all the hallmarks of the psychoanalytic notion of the authentic act. By “*striking at himself*, at what is most precious to him” (Žižek 2000a: 122), namely his self-interest, Dad is not, as it might appear, ‘stupidly’ sabotaging his own life. On the contrary, he is “cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy [keeps] him in check.” Dad’s authentic act makes it clear to the corrupt politicians and their thugs that no

ransom may be held against him. The act also allows Dad to directly over-identify with the ideology of shared prosperity (that the parties cynically propagate to win votes) to the point where he literally hijacks it. Dad's cynical heroism may be seen as laughably naïve today but it is precisely what Okri's politics demands. To enjoy shared prosperity, one should not just talk about it or expect to just share the prosperity of others. One should more importantly, share one's own and, in doing so, concretely demonstrate that man is, or can at least try to be, god to man (Okri 1992d). For Dad, there is no distinction between theory and practice. Through his actions, he demonstrates to the powers-that-be the ethical way in which power ought to be exercised – not for obscene self-enrichment but towards the upliftment of the welfare of the people, the impoverished compound-dwellers including himself, Mum and Azaro (all of whom are only one socioeconomic step away from becoming beggars themselves).

For the above reasons, it would be inaccurate to say that "Dad never really meets politics head-on" (Phillips 1996: 167), or that Okri is "more introspective, more personal [and] less radical, than Achebe and his peers" (Charles Nivens, in Hawley 1995: 37). Okri, through Dad, is in fact 'terroristically' political since he goes a step *beyond* the kind of intervention that works within the framework of existing sociopolitical relations. His politics is the "art of the impossible" (Okri 1996a: 43), a politics that seeks to change "the very parameter of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation" (Žižek 1999f: 199). Likewise,

Dad *is* political – not in the naïve sense of being the superhero who single-handedly changes the world. Rather, his role is closer to Fredric Jameson’s “vanishing mediator” (1988) or, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s less romantic terms, “manure of the future” (Sloterdijk 1987: 182), that is, a catalyst like Ade who paves the way so that others after him may extend the struggle.

The logic and moral of Dad’s radical act is embedded in a parable he tells Azaro about the good man and the evil mosquito. “There was once a man who suffered all the bad things that can happen to a human being”, Dad narrates. Everything precious had been taken away from him. His son died, his house burned down, the wife left him, his boss gave him the sack and, while crossing the road, a cow kicked him in the face. On top of that, the man fell sick and began to die. Instead of cursing his fate, the man bore his ill fortune with fortitude. Out of nowhere, a mosquito appeared before him with an irresistible proposal: stop being a good man and you will not only live but gain all the wealth and luck one can only dream of possessing; refuse and you will die the next morning. The man rejected the mosquito’s offer and set off to perform more good deeds in one night than in his entire life. The next morning, the mosquito returned. To its astonishment, the man said that he was not afraid to die:

I have given them my life. I used to be one. Now, I am many. They will become more. How many of us can you kill? The more you kill, the more we will become. (*SOE* 46)

Through the three main authentic acts he performs in *TFR*, Dad has well and truly awakened to the radical possibility of impossible political transformations, the truth of which is encapsulated in the famous sentence which appears near the end of the first book of the abiku trilogy: "We can redream this world and make the dream real" (*TFR* 498).



## ***SONGS OF ENCHANTMENT***

### **Mathematics of Destiny**

Where *TFR* closes on a uplifting note, *Songs of Enchantment* (*SOE*) opens to an ominous future. As if to remind us readers of the impossibility of completion, and as if to caution us against hastily equating Dad's transformations in the first book of the trilogy with 'arrival', Azaro says early in *SOE* that nothing is ever finished and "struggles are never truly concluded" (*SOE* 3). With his abiku foresight, Azaro reveals that the political chaos brought on by the coming independence is spreading. It is already amidst the compound people, "waiting to burst into flames" and unhinge the minds and lives of many. Children will die from water poisoning. Around the country, dissension will grow fat and many who have hitherto opposed the rich party will accept its patronage. They will be defeated by hunger, unable to wait any longer for justice to come. Ade will die in a car crash, his father will go insane and be killed by thugs from the Party of the Rich, Madame Koto will be stabbed (but her death postponed until *IR*) and countless other calamities will befall the compound people before *SOE* runs its course.

Interestingly, although the unborn nation is fast disintegrating in the novel, Okri does not see it as a “dark” book:

My books that seem to be books of light are actually books of despair, and I always say that, with the passing of time, *Astonishing the Gods*, which is seen as the book of light, will grow darker, and a book like *Songs of Enchantment*, which is seen as a dark book, will grow lighter. It will change over time. (Falconer 1997)

Okri does not elaborate on how *SOE* might be seen as growing lighter in time but the answer is already implicit in the ‘twisted’ logic of the impossible (‘the greater the lack, the more there is to overcome, and the more levels of self-transcendence there is to achieve’). Darkness is light in the same way that every failure is a secret victory, a prepared ground for the active reinvention of a higher order. In the context of *SOE*, we might say that the darkness overshadowing the lives of the compound people is a prelude to the emergence of a higher political order. This “mathematics of destiny” (Okri, in Falconer 1997: 46), the way in which things, when the time is right, will somehow work out for those who persevere, applies as much to the trilogy as it does to Nigeria and Africa.

“Things peak at different times for different people”, says Okri (Hattersley 1999). “Africa has gone through its own stage of civilisation a thousand years ago and gone into a decline. It’s like Greece.” Elsewhere, Okri suggests the

reason for such a decline: "It is possible that one has been travelling on one road for too long" (Linton 1991). As a result, one has 'forgotten' the reason for travelling. Forgetting, as we know from the road-builders in *TFR*, leads to the fall of civilisation. Applying the logic to postcolonial Africa, we might say that the people's challenge to stay alive (within the global economic system) and to stay intact (as a nation in a world divided by ethnonationalist upsurges) need not extend into bad infinity. The prevalent image of Africa as a perpetually starving and naturally backward continent "inhabited not by human beings but by a monstrous variation of black insects" (*IR* 203) is far from a reflection of the norm or the culmination of its destiny. Similarly, Africa's present decline does not suggest, as "contemporary peakers" believe, that its people "never had a peak" and that "all they had was dark ages" (Okri, in Hattersley 1999).

Okri points out that rarely do commentators underline the continent's "incredible capacity not to die and not be destroyed" (Hattersley 1999). They tend to overlook Africa's "resilience of the spirit" and over-emphasise the negatives such as "the effects of colonialism on our consciousness". It is not possible, Okri asks, that colonialism did not penetrate the kernel of Africa, "our spiritual and aesthetic and mythic internal structures, the way in which we perceive the world" (Wilkinson 1992: 86-7)? Of course, he says, colonialism had been "a hugely negative thing in many ways – particularly its effect on the self-perception of the people . . . for a while, the people saw themselves as less than what they were"

(Hattersley 1999). But does it mean that the damage is irreparable or that Africa's resilience is less worthy of attention in comparison to its "brief nightmare of colonisation" (*IR* 114)?

Okri's contestation of the metanarrative of the west as the privileged agent of history and the bearer of light to Africa is not a new enterprise. Many others before him have questioned if scholars (including even well-meaning Africanist historiographers and anthropologists) have not themselves perpetuated the distorted image of the dark continent in their haste to grasp and explain away its failures (see, for example, Temu and Swai 1981; Jewsiewicki and Newbury 1986; Austen 1993). Similarly, the relationship between coloniser-colonised has been debated since as early as Senghor, Fanon, and Memmi. Much of that has been explored elsewhere so, to avoid needless repetition, we will in this chapter limit our focus to just one question: where does Okri sit in this familiar landscape? We might begin by noting, first of all, that in spite of evident postcolonial concerns in his writings, Okri himself is not keen on the label. As he says in an interview:

I reject utterly the way in which my work is placed within the whole context of the margin, the periphery, postcolonial and stuff like that. I think those are very poor descriptions of the work that some of us are trying to do. Because it completely situates the work within a time/historical context and not within the context of the self and inner necessity, which is bigger and beyond that. And there are affinities between writers that have more to do with that



than they have to do with the fact that they both come from so-called ex-colonial nations. When people do that they're not seeing what I'm doing and they're completely missing the point and I feel sad about that. (Falconer 1997: 44)

Here one might perhaps be tempted to read Okri's self-distancing from the "postcolonial and stuff like that" with a pinch of salt. After all, according to the standard cynical view, writers almost never fail to bemoan the fact that their writings have been misinterpreted, and readers should therefore treat writers' outbursts as a kind of writerly posturing that ultimately has little if any bearing on the writings themselves. There is, generally speaking, nothing inherently wrong with this approach. Writers do sometimes overlook the textuality of their texts. The problem with taking this approach to Okri, however, is that his texts *are* in many ways at odds with textbook prescriptions of postcolonial theory. For instance, is 'Africanness' a 'stupid' essentialist myth, a defensive-reactionary appeal to some unique essence that does not exist? Is it a self-defeating response to colonialism, a cover-up of Africa's inferiority complex and shame of its colonizability? Could it instead be a 'necessary lie' that is useful only if we use it to "free us from our smallness" and "help us get to our true reality" (Okri 1999b: 5)? These are some of the key questions we will be examining in relation to Okri's attempt at revalidating Africa's relationship with the rest of the world.

## The African Way

Dad continues to propound his fantastic political visions and the novel ways in which he is “going to rule this country” (*SOE* 119) in the same feverish style in *SOE* as in *TFR*. It is in *SOE* more than *TFR*, however, that these visions attain fuller density and historical-contextual specificity. Consider, for example, the episode set in Madame Koto’s bar where Dad is found sounding off his political ideas to Azaro and goes on for so long and so vigorously that Azaro, already growing edgy, is invaded by all kinds of insects. Although this scene is not much different from the others where Dad talks about wondrous political possibilities, it is particularly worth noting because Dad’s ideals are for the first time explicitly referred to (by Azaro) as visions of an “*African* utopia” (emphasis added, *SOE* 124), where “we would pool all our secret wisdom, distil our philosophies, conquer our bad history, and make our people glorious in the world of continents.”

Africa, continues Dad, “is the home of the world” that “could be the garden of the earth” (*SOE* 126). But “look at how we live in this world”, he laments, pointing to all that is wrong with the continent. Dad’s emphasis on Africa is amplified by Azaro’s account of a momentous spirit event secretly taking place amidst the nation’s political chaos. With his *abiku* eyes, Azaro sights in the sky “the slow migration of the great spirits of Africa” (26). He is initially unable to comprehend what he sees, their dreams “impenetrable, locked and

coded in gnostic riddles.” After a few sightings, he begins to understand that the innumerable great spirits of the continent and master spirits from all over the world are “coming together for their mighty convocation” (40-1). They are trailed by “representatives of our forgotten gods, our transformative ancestors” (159), and behind them, representatives from the spirit world who had lived

The African Way – The Way of compassion and fire and serenity: The Way of freedom and power and imaginative life; The Way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere; that keeps the spirit pure and primed to all the rich possibilities of living . . . The Way that preaches attunement with all the higher worlds, that believes in forgiveness and generosity of spirit, always receptive, always listening, always kindling the understanding of signs . . . The Way that always, like a river, flows into and flows out of the myriad Ways of the world. (*SOE* 159-60)

Also referred to as “the Original Way” (*SOE* 160), the African Way is yet another expression of Okri’s trope of (un)fixity. Characterised by neither absolute fixity nor absolute non-fixity, the African Way is fluid and open to the myriad other Ways. From Azaro we also learn that it is a way of being in the world, a spiritual mode of existence in which “forgotten and undiscovered” ancestral knowledge was produced (161). Ancestral knowledge encompasses

legends and moments of history . . . wonderful forms of divination by numbers and cowries and signs, numerological systems for

summoning the gods, . . . the stories and myths and philosophical disquisitions on the relativities of African Time and Space . . . astronomical incidents: the date of a stellar explosion, a supernova bursting over the intense dream of the continent, heralding, according to a king's soothsayer, a brief nightmare of colonization, and an eventual, surpassing, renaissance. (*IR* 113-4)

From Okri's description of the African Way quoted above, it would seem that he is advocating a return to the idealized purity of pre-colonial Africa, and that he subscribes to Senghor's Negritude which today is generally dismissed as naïve and essentialist. The question is: is it possible for Okri's African Way to overlap with Senghor's Negritude? Is Okri not known as a postmodern writer, and are postmodern writers not opposed to essentialism? To answer these questions, we should perhaps begin by pointing out that the most unfortunate thing about Negritude is that the popular view of it being theoretically suspect is also the most inaccurate. Negritude has been dismissed for setting up false binarism: "Negro emotion confronting Hellenistic reason; intuitive Negro reasoning through participation facing European analytical thinking through utilization" (Mudimbe 1988: 94). It has also been criticised by writers like Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka and Ezekiel Mphahlele for making the black man look ridiculous by portraying him as having "insect antennas" and "mystic emotion" (Senghor 1964: 74). Are these fair accusations? Let us look at two passages from Senghor's *On African Socialism*:



In contrast to the classic European, the Negro African does not draw a line between himself and the object; he does not hold it at a distance, nor does he merely look at it and analyze it. After holding it at a distance, after scanning it without analyzing it, he takes it vibrant in his hands, careful not to kill or fix it. He touches it, feels it, *smells* it. (Senghor 1964: 72)

...

Thus the Negro African . . . abandons his personality to become identified with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other; he lives a symbiosis . . . he 'knows [i.e. "is born with"] the Other'. Subjects and objects are dialectically face to face in the very act of knowledge. (1964: 72-3)

Of the two passages, the first is clearly the romantic one. It paints the Negro African as a native endowed with the mythical ability to perceive secret interconnectivities between all things and experience harmonic oneness with the world. The second passage, by contrast, is not only perfectly reasonable but also, one is tempted to say, Lacanian in implication: the Other is not external to the subject's identity but intimately external; it is *extimate*, "radically interior and at the same time already exterior" to oneself (Žižek 1989: 180). The subject always by default misrecognises the truth about this extimate relationship. That is why, it is only when he abandons his personality (his *agalma*, what is most precious to him) to become identified with the Other (recognise that he has always already

been the Author of his Fate), will he be symbolically reborn in the place where the Other always-already was (become a self-recognising subject of drive). Reading the second passage from Senghor from a Lacanian standpoint, we might also say that reality is not a pre-discursive object but something that has to be found “in the very act of knowledge” (Senghor 1964: 73), in the traversal of one’s fundamental fantasy. (That Senghor might have been influenced by Lacan is not at all improbable. We need only recall that Negritude, which sprang from French-speaking African intellectuals, was “not an exotic or theoretical doctrine foreign to French thought” (Markovitz 1969: 47), and that Senghor, then a prominent figure in the elite French social circle, was well versed in continental philosophy.)

It is not often mentioned that Senghor was acutely aware of the hostile reception to his ideas. Defending his position, he says in “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century” that all he is simply saying is that Africa has gone through history in ways that are distinct from Europe, and that because of these differences, Africa has come to possess unique culturally-encoded sensibilities that are not irrelevant and inferior simply because they differ from the European norm. The fundamentals of Senghor’s vision are not lost on scholars like V.Y. Mudimbe who argue that the dominant view of Negritude as promoting false binarisms “seems quite wrong” (1988: 94). Senghor’s philosophy, he says, can be simply understood through a challenging proposition he offered to the Senegalese Socialist Party in July 1963: “Finally, what too many Africans lack, is

the awareness of our poverty and creative imagination, I mean the spirit of resourcefulness.” The same point has been highlighted by Janet Vaillant. With Negritude, she says, Senghor is not trying to resuscitate the past; neither is he advocating that Africans live in a museum. Rather, he is “making sure that in transforming the African milieu, Africans remain true to the best tradition of the past” (1990: 265). Is that not also the same point Okri makes when he formulates the African aesthetic as “a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions” and “the mythic frame that shapes the way we affect the world and the way the world affects us” (Wilkinson 1992: 88)?

In the *abiku* trilogy, Okri not only insists on the resilience of the African Way, he also says that those who attempt to negate it would only end up negating themselves. To borrow the words of the Governor-General in *IR*, because imperialists “set out to dominate the world, they are condemned to live with the negative facts of their domination. They will be changed by the world that they set out to colonize” (*IR* 161). The logic of ‘he who thinks he penetrates Africa is, unbeknownst to him, always-already penetrated’ (to adapt Lacan’s ‘the one who counts is always-already included in the account’) is nicely illustrated by Cezair-Thompson in her reading of the ‘famished road’ motif. In her essay, she contrasts Okri’s road of creation with the road in Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*. The latter, she argues, represents the path “which the colonizers impose upon Africa, and which symbolically appropriates the natives’ rights to ‘imagine’ their own

destiny, map their own terrain and tell their own story” (1996: 35). Okri’s road, by contrast, is mythic-creative in origins, always transforming itself and elusive of all attempts to pin it down. It is perpetually hungry and ever-ready to devour those who travel on it without first offering the proper sacrifices. In *TFR*, one of its victims is the white man in Mum’s story. The white man in the tale was once an important figure in the colonial government of the unborn nation. Then all the Independence trouble started and for three years he tried to leave the country but kept failing. Even taking a plane out was futile. When he got off the plane, he found himself back in the same place. It was only later he discovered that “the only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you” (*TFR* 483). The moral here is that the white man – representative of “short-sighted conquerors of the times” (*SOE* 160) – may colonise the continent, extract its riches and wreak havoc on it, but ultimately it is he who is ‘screwed’ (like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*), ‘swallowed up’ by the Africa.

Okri’s Original Way is similar to “the Way” in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* in that both are related to the concept of healing through ancestral knowledge. The difference between them, however, is that while Armah’s Way is directed primarily towards healing the social diseases caused by colonialism (Phillips 1996: 170), Okri’s Way is “a supra-human agency that provides the present generation with the means to remember forgotten wonders and regenerative myths.” Maggii Phillips is correct to note that it cures by



revitalising the subject with “heightened psychic perception.” However, it would be erroneous to assume from this that the psychic/spiritual and the social/political in Okri are separable. Firstly it is worth stressing that healing and self-reconciliation via Okri’s African Way is not equivalent to the ideal act of rendering oneself ontologically complete by returning to ancestral practice. It is rather to “say yes to destiny and illumination” (*TFR* 487), to rekindle what Senghor calls Africa’s “spirit of resourcefulness”. Put another way, it is to replace one’s cynical-defeatist attitude of thought with one which keeps the mind wide open to possibilities in impossibilities.

To clarify this with one final illustration, we might imagine the subject in search of healing via the African Way as having to “make a parabolic journey” (*SOE* 281) across to the unknown ‘other side’ where the Cure is believed to lie waiting. The twist here is that if and when the subject does eventually make the journey and cross the threshold (‘let go’ of himself, think the unthinkable), he will discover that, contrary to what he had hitherto assumed, the Cure is not ‘out there’, external to himself, to be found in the mimicking of ancestral rituals. These rituals, “if they are noble” (Okri 1999b: 5), are only there to help us cope with the “fire and ice of being born” (*SOE* 131) and to recognise that “OUR DESTINY IS [and has always been] *IN OUR HANDS*” (italics added, *SOE* 279). This perhaps explains the significance of the novel’s title and the reason why Okri sees *SOE* as a book of light rather than darkness. *SOE* celebrates the enchantment and

redivination of the self, and this celebration is made possible, ironically enough, by the “new powers” that are attempting to negate it, namely the corrupt political class of the would-be nation as well as “those whose hunger had been defeated by the promise of wealth and instant protection” and “who didn’t want to suffer and wait for justice any more” (*SOE* 111). This is ultimately the same as saying that *SOE* ‘celebrates’ political strife – not by perversely revelling in it, but in recognising that it is, in the final account, a secret opportunity to surmount the seven mountains of life and, in doing so, surmount oneself. For that reason, we argue, the spiritual in Okri is always-already political.

### **All Things are Linked: Okri, Senghor and the Universal Civilisation**

If Okri’s African Way is, as with Senghor’s Negritude, not ‘stupid’ essentialism, might it then perhaps qualify as strategic essentialism, defined by Gayatri Spivak as the ideally self-conscious “strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword” (‘African’, ‘woman’, ‘the name of the nation’, and so on) (Spivak 1993: 3)? As one of the “myriad Ways of the World” (*SOE* 160), is the African Way in any way comparable to, say, the ‘Asian Way’, an ideology strategically championed by East Asian leaders like Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad?

The Asian Way asserts its particularity as a synthesis of 'Asian values' and capitalist-economic rationalism. It can be and is in fact powerfully appealing to many Asians who harbour a "deep resentment against the West for its past colonialism and who have an inferiority complex in regard to Western civilization" (Tatsuo 1999: 28). Not dissimilar to Okri's Way, it is at once a reaction-formation to the trauma of colonialism, a rejection of the West's self-representation as the body of universal values, as well as a "beautiful" (1999: 40) way of healing its post-colonised people. The two Ways – Asian and Okri's – clearly overlap in certain ways. If we examine them closely, however, we will find that they are quite distinct. Unlike Okri's Way, the Asian Way is in the last instance a cynical ideology deftly employed by the political class in East Asia to restrict civil rights, inculcate blind obedience to authority, cover up corrupt practices and perpetuate existing relations of oppression. It is also a kind of reverse racism, constituted as it is strictly on the basis of pure difference, where transaction between self and other could only be conducted with the former being perpetually tormented by a deep fear of being robbed of its superior Asian Thing-*jouissance*. (This, despite the obvious fact that there is no one homogenous Asia, just as there is also no one Africa).

In radical contrast, Okri's Way is not, to put it in Laclau's parlance, a particularity posited in a purely differential relation with other particularities (Laclau 1996d: 27). It does not close in upon itself but "always, like a river, flows

into and flows out of the myriad Ways of the world" (*SOE* 160). Although it has its distinctive, culturally and historically determined expressions (forms and divinations, stories and myths, etc.), it shares with the other Ways the same pulsation, "a nameless yearning" for the impossible (Okri 1997b: 11). Like the river of creation which became a road which then branched out to the whole world (*TFR* 3), *all* Ways flow like rivers to the great sea to constitute what Okri calls the "universal civilisation".

The notion of universal civilisation has not received as much attention as the abiku and famished road motif but it is pivotal to, if not culminative of, Okri's vision in which "All things are linked" (*TFR* 483). It appears to have received first mention in 'Redreaming the World', an essay where Okri, by way of clearing the ground for the introduction of the term, reminds contemporary victors not to forget the mathematics of destiny, i.e. that "to swallow the history of others into your own history is to expect to be constipated with the history of others" (Okri 1990). To "strangled nations" and "wounded peoples", he asks that they not "hold themselves down with rage about their historical past or their intolerable present" but to instead find the humility to distil what they have into the "highest creativity". It is only when people recognise the logic of the rise and fall of things, Okri writes, that there may be hope "for us all to create the beginnings of the first true universal civilisation in the history of recorded and unrecorded time."



Universal civilisation surfaces next in Okri's essay, 'Time to Dream the Best Dream of All' (1995b) wherein he urges the United Nations (UN) to steadfastly commit to its "universal goal": "the realisation of the human potential, the eradication of poverty, the enhancement of liberty, and the triumph of justice". Despite UN's shortcomings, Okri says, it is today "the only organisation still vaguely capable of articulating the notion of one world, a sort of symphony of humanity." It is not until *Astonishing The Gods* (ATG), though, that the notion receives its fullest treatment. From the allegorical novel, we learn that the dream of the Invisibles is to "initiate on earth the first universal civilisation where love and wisdom would be as food and air" (ATG 131), a place where

the most ordinary goal was living the fullest life, in which creativity in all spheres of endeavour was the basic alphabet, and in which the most sublime lessons possible were always learned and relearned from the unforgettable suffering which was the bedrock of their great new civilisation. (ATG 28)

Since ATG, the notion has been invoked in several other places. In 'The Joys of Story-Telling I', for instance, Okri reflects on the postmodern collapse of the great systems (in whose name nations and individuals have wreaked violence upon others), how the "fragmentary edifices of certainties strewn about the world" are *celebrated* rather than mourned by strong poets, "albeit with some sadness in their hearts", because they know that only when the last remaining towers of

certainty collapse can “the beginnings of a true world history and genius flower . . . only then might the world hope as one and struggle as one, towards the first universal golden age” (Okri 1997b: 30). Finally, we come to the abiku trilogy where the notion is invoked as the “grand picture of humanity” (*IR* 113), a composite of “the great jigsaw that the creator [had] spread all over the diverse peoples of the earth, hinting that no one race or people can have the complete picture or monopoly of the ultimate possibilities of the human genius alone” (112).

Even from these few examples, it is clear that the universal civilisation is a central constant in Okri’s writings. What is perhaps not as evident, however, is how much the notion recalls, if not owe its roots to Senghor’s lesser-known Negritudist conception of the “Civilization of the Universal” (1993: 32). For Senghor, the universal civilisation is a reconciled totality of inherently *equal* parts of a “divided but interdependent world”. It is a panhuman order to be achieved through a world-historical “dynamic symbiosis” wherein only the fecund elements of each part will be retained and the harmful discarded (Senghor 1964: 49-50). In Senghor’s view, Africa stood to benefit from “an infusion of the inquisitive spirit and a higher development of analytical reason”, while “Western Europe, now locked in a dehumanising worship of machines and material wealth, will benefit from the African contribution of its greater emotional and spiritual development, vitality, and understanding of the interconnectedness of all life in

the universe" (Vaillant 1990: 266). Senghor rejected Sartre's class-inflected reading of Negritude which says that Africa's black cultural values will be cancelled out when the grand symbiosis of cultures happens. Africa, Senghor argued, will remain African, true to the culture of Negritude and the goal of African socialism which was to create "a society in which the human personality can reach its potential" (Vaillant 1990: 268). As well, Senghor rejected Marxist historical determinism, that is, the belief that one day when the revolutionary proletariat has finally done away with capitalism, all of society's false contradictions will dissolve, power will cancel itself out and a post-political utopia will materialise itself. In Senghor's humanistic view, the march of history was neither inevitable nor irreversible, for if it was, then "there could be no purpose in human life or value in any human ideal" (Vaillant 1990: 266: 268). He did, however, ultimately believe, in contrast to Okri, that the new order was a practical possibility through collective effort.

It is clear from what we have just seen that Senghor's philosophy has, directly or otherwise, shaped Okri's own. Although there are essentialist moments in both conceptions that would furrow the brows of postcolonial critics, we should not, as previously iterated, overlook the fundamental premise of Okri's and Senghor's project: the reaffirmation of the worth of *all* Ways within the universal scheme of things. We should also note that Okri does not draw wholesale from Senghor but radicalises his thought, "blasphemes aesthetically" (Okri, in Falconer

1997: 46), we might say. For example, where Senghor conceives the realization of the universal civilisation as a distant but actual possibility, Okri sees it as an impossible ideal to be pursued but never to be fully attained because that would only lead to the cessation of the infinite overcoming of self-limitations. Okri's universal civilisation (like the road-builders' Heaven in *ATG*) is in this precise sense a "transgressive utopia" (Sargisson 2000: 2) which, instead of insisting on arrival, celebrates process over product.



- 5 -

## ***INFINITE RICHES***

### **The Third Cycle**

As with *SOE*, *Infinite Riches* (*IR*), the third volume of the abiku trilogy, begins on a solemn note that anticipates the advent of some major calamity. In contrast to Azaro's opening lines in *SOE*, Dad's which opens *IR* is markedly 'unmagical', intimating that Dad is perhaps, for the first time, coming to realise that one man's consummate optimism and ceaseless struggles may not be enough to shortcircuit the nation's abiku cycle of bad infinity:

Time is growing . . . And our suffering is growing too. When will our suffering bear fruit? One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And who will make it real? (*IR* 5)

The reader who has followed the abiku saga from its inception would, no doubt, growing a little restive, ask the same: will the people's positive dream for

the would-be nation's flowering ever come true, or will the nation repeat *ad infinitum* the abiku cycle of bad infinity?

As the nation enters the final stages of its birth-throes in *IR*, Dad will be arrested and imprisoned on suspicion of murder for daring to bury the rotting corpse of Ade's father. Mum, hitherto content to remain in the background, will temporarily come forward and overshadow Dad after she stumbles into national prominence as a political figure. Madame Koto, the seemingly invincible barwoman-turned-politician will finally meet with her death, as Azaro has long predicted. And Jeremiah, the small-time photographer, who was brutalised in *TFR* by political thugs for taking incriminating pictures of "reality and corruption" (*TFR* 233) before he disappeared, will reemerge as a successful "international photographer" (*IR* 41). On the political side of things, the infinitely postponed great political rally planned since *TFR* will finally take place, albeit to anticlimactic results. Future leaders will have dreamt of "nation-destroying policies in advance" (*IR* 11), secret "economic pacts between the colonizer and the colonized" signed, and the elections that will "seal the fate of the unborn nation" (*IR* 337) forewon by an unnamed political party that publicly vows to let those who vote against it "eat dustbins" (*IR* 228).

*IR* is decidedly bleak if approached directly. But if it is read in the light of Okri's logic of the impossible, we will see or at least remind ourselves to see that

every failure is a secret victory, an opportunity to reinvent a higher order and rediscover our “infinite riches”. That, arguably, is the import of the book’s title. Infinite riches, a phrase borrowed from Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Jew of Malta* (“Infinite riches in a little room”), is synonymous with notions of the “greater self” and the “immutable star”. All three terms refer to humanity’s “immense possibilities” (*IR* 162), the lost-forgotten wealth that the diverse people of the earth have to rediscover before the “awesome picture . . . of divinity, or humanity” may be constituted. These pillar-concepts in Okri’s philosophy – infinite riches, universal civilisation, logic of the impossible – underpin *IR* as surely as they do *TFR* and *SOE*.

What makes *IR* interestingly different from the first two books, though, is not so much Okri’s revisitation of these concepts which we have previously examined, but his fiery treatment of colonial racism and the betrayal of the would-be nation by the coloniser and the colonised. As we signposted in Chapter 3, *IR* is by far the ‘angriest’ book in the trilogy. It is the most historically-engaged in that it contains more concrete historical allusions than *TFR* and *SOE* combined to link the ‘fictional’ unborn nation to Nigeria. And it contains the strongest allusions yet to Okri’s ideological persuasion where Nigeria’s North-South debate is concerned. To flesh out these points, let us begin with an examination of Okri’s portrayal of Governor-General (the queen’s representative to the soon-to-be

postcolonial nation) who, by virtue of nefariousness, eclipses the rest of the characters in the book.

### **The Governor-General**

An “Englishman with a polyp on the end of his nose” (*IR* 110), the Governor-General is damningly described in *IR* as the leader of “a country whose people he did not like much, and seldom saw except” as “a monstrous variation of black insects [that hindered] his complete domination of the continent” (*IR* 36, 203). For him, contemplating Africa amounts to ruminating aloud to his languid, tropics-detesting wife on Africa’s Otherness (blackness of skin, inferiority, unreason). In one scene, he contemplates two options. Is Africa a pathological aberration, an accidental effect of higher creation, as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* suggest? (In Ovid’s account, the wilful son of the sun-god brought the sun-chariot so close to Africa that the skin of its inhabitants became permanently scorched.) Or is Africa the abjured *cause* of western civilisation, as Herodotus suggests? (According to Herodotus, Africa, through Egypt, created ancient Greek civilisation which in turn made western civilisation possible.) After a moment’s reflection, the Governor-General decides to go with Ovid’s theory. The choice allows him to continue to misrecognise the inversion of his worldview, i.e. that the presupposed otherness of Africa is the very support of his racist fantasy of western superiority, and that



the "blood of the continent" is what "sustain his divine status in the universe of humanity" (*IR* 205).

That the Governor-General should choose to enjoy Africa, including the three African women who "consoled" and bore him seven illegitimate children (*IR* 36), is entirely consistent with his role as he who, with his white man's authority and in "sloping calligraphic hand", rewrites Africa's history:

[He] deprived us of history, of civilization, and unintentionally, deprived us of humanity too . . . And as the Governor-General rewrote time (made his longer, made our shorter), as he rendered invisible our accomplishments, wiped out traces of our ancient civilization, rewrote the meaning and beauty of our customs, as he abolished the world of spirits, diminished our feats of memory, turned our philosophies into crude superstitions, our rituals into childish dances, our religions into animal worship and animistic trances, our art into crude relics and primitive forms . . . as he rewrote our past, he altered our present. (*IR* 111-2)

After Okri sets the Governor-General up as a thorough racist, the latter is then made to renounce his enjoyment. By means of Okri's 'divine intervention', an angel flies over the city and touches "the Governor-General with a sudden perception of the beauties of the continent" (*IR* 157). So "touched" does he become that he starts to write about a different Africa, one which Senghor would not have been unfamiliar with:

He rhapsodized about their love for music, their unscientific thinking, their explosive laughter, their preference for myth over reality, for story over fact, for mystification over clarification, for dance over stillness, for ecstasy over contemplation, for metaphysics over logic, for the many over the one. (*IR* 159)

The Governor-General in *IR* is clearly not a character in the full sense of the term. He is more a caricature and a whipping-boy whose primary function is to illustrate Okri's point on white racism against Africa and the truth of his three-pillared philosophy. That Okri uses his poetic licence to animate the colonial figure into performing 'impossible' acts (e.g. "rhapsodize" about the beauty of blackness) does not mean that the latter is without historical precedents. Reading *IR* against Nigeria, it is possible to show that Okri's Governor-General may well have been inspired by, if not at the very least an allusion to two prominent British colonial administrators who had served in Nigeria: Sir Frederic Lugard and Sir James Robertson.

Like many British colonial administrators, Lugard (the first Governor-General of Nigeria, 1914-9) was famous for his unapologetic racism, a trait which historians like Margery Perham saw not as a crime but as imperial benevolence:

To Lugard and the other makers of new empire Africa was a place of poverty, ignorance, and of unremediable cruelties. Above all, they had seen the helplessness of Africa in the grip of slave-trade.

They had no doubt that the greatest conceivable good for this unhappy continent was for it to come under the rule of civilized powers. (Perham 1956: 712)

Lugard was additionally famous for his contempt for the 'pagan' and Christian South, and for his friendliness towards the pale-skinned feudal Muslim North which he saw as possessing a superior civilisation (due to the alleged regenerative powers of Aryan and Hamitic blood with which it had been infused through Islam) (Isichei 1983: 392). On a parade of the Eastern chiefs of Calabar, Lugard had reportedly exclaimed that it was "the most wonderfully comic sight I have ever seen in Africa! The very antithesis of the dignified Mohamedan Emirs of Northern Nigeria in their flowing robes with their medieval civilisation" (Isichei 1983: 391).

Lugard's preference for the feudal North was not just motivated by political expediency. According to Isichei, there was "some more deep-seated neurosis at work" (1983: 391). This perhaps accounts for Lugard's belief that education made Africans in general "less fertile, more susceptible to lung-trouble and other diseases and to defective dentition [arrangement of teeth]." It also probably explains why Lugard kept Christianity and western education out of the Muslim North (to the Emirs' delight) and "reserved his most venomous ridicule and hostility for [those] who resembled him most closely, and had taken his culture as a model" – a description which perfectly fits the westernised,

christianised and educated Nigerians in the South (Isichei 1983: 391). Lugard had good reasons to despise the South and think of Southerners as “infernally bumptious” creatures who “think themselves superior to everyone, white men included.” Southerners were vocal, combative and nationalistic when compared with their Northern counterparts. Furthermore, they had had the temerity to reject colonialism and demand for independence even though they had not, in Lugard’s view, “shown themselves to be possessed of ability to rule either [their] own community or backward peoples of [their] own race, even under favourable conditions” (Coleman 1958: 158). As Lugard further remarked:

You free them, you give them equitable laws, more or less, and show them a means, by trading, of becoming rich and comfortable and safe, and before you know where you are they want to drive you out, imagining that they can govern themselves because one or two have been educated. (Isichei 1983: 391)

In comparison to Lugard whose real-life racism makes the ‘fictional’ racism of Okri’s Governor-General appear benign, his colleague, Sir James Robertson (the last Governor-General of pre-independent Nigeria, 1955-60), has been treated much more kindly by mainstream historians. Michael Crowder, a well-known historian, described Robertson in his book as “the ideal man to represent Britain during the final phase of [Nigeria’s] self-government” (1973: 290). Sir Gawain Bell, a former colleague of Robertson in Sudan and Governor of



Northern Nigeria between 1957-62, was even more effusive: "He worked untiringly to preserve the unity of the Federation and to forestall or prevent anything that might damage it . . . To him too, Nigeria owes a substantial and lasting debt" (Bell 1989: 107). Margery Perham, who penned the foreword to Robertson's memoir, *Transition in Africa*, too was full of praise. In her opinion, Robertson – like Lugard whom she described as "the pride of his country" (Perham 1956: vi) – had displayed "dignity and imperturbability" as the Governor-General of Nigeria. He was "like a charioteer whose task was not to choose the course or the winning post but to keep his three highly spirited horses running in unison" (Perham 1974: xiii).

The three "horses" refer to the leaders of the three rival political parties in Nigeria at that time: Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (NPC in the North), Nnamdi Azikiwe (NCNC in the East) and Chief Obafemi Awolowo (AG in the West). All three contested in the 1959 elections under Robertson's auspices. The elections were critical in the history of Nigeria as they were to decide who would have governing control of the country upon independence, and whether the would-be nation would begin life with its integrity intact or mortally compromised. They were also in all likelihood the same elections Okri had in mind when he closed *IR* with the ominous line, "The elections would seal the fate of the unborn nation" (*IR* 337) and set in motion a chain of catastrophic events

that is the history of Nigeria's bad infinity: "coups, executions, scandals, . . . uprisings . . . and the four-year war" (188).<sup>33</sup>

If the 1959 Nigerian elections are the same elections referred to in *IR*, does history in turn bear witness to Okri's contention in *IR* that the election "results had already been decided in advance" (*IR* 176) – "rigged" (57), in a word? Does it also show or at least intimate that Sir James Robertson, like Okri's 'fictional' Governor-General, was "made a chief by a tribe in return for a favourable decision in a fierce boundary dispute with another tribe" (*IR* 158)? And was he an impartial "charioteer" who did not "choose the course or the winning post" but kept "his three highly spirited horses running in unison", as Perham vouches (1974: xiii)? Comprehensive third-party accounts of Robertson's role in Nigerian history are conspicuously hard to come by. The ones that are available are sketchy at best. In Crowder's *The Story of Nigeria* (1973: 169), Robertson is mentioned but once and in passing at that. Coleman in his seminal book *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (1958) sums up the Governor-General's role in one short paragraph. Isichei's *A History of Nigeria* (1983) does not even have him listed in the index. That Robertson should receive so little attention from historians is extremely curious, especially if we take into account Perham's claim that he had not merely presided over the formal stages but played the role of an

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<sup>33</sup> The "four-year war" is a clear allusion to Nigeria's first military coup and counter-coup which took place within a year (1966), and the succeeding three-year Biafran war (1967-1970).

active mediator whose influence greatly shaped political events leading up to Nigeria's independence (1974: xii).

Nonetheless, from the little that is available, it is evident that Robertson, like Lugard, was more a friend to the North than he was to the South. Southern leaders, his memoir reads, were argumentative, uninhibited and vociferous troublemakers "who noisily showed [their] disagreement in Council or Parliament without good manners or restraint" (1974: 223). By contrast, Balewa, the main "horse" from the North, was a "man of the highest integrity" (1974: 214). Robertson wrote that he and Balewa became so close in the course of their friendship that there was "little [they] could not discuss" (1974: 214-5). So close, in fact, that he invited Balewa to form federal government even "*before* the results of the [1959] elections were announced (but presumably when they were already known)" (emphasis added, Osaghae 1998: 33).

Nnamdi Azikiwe ('Zik'), the leader of NCNC and the Eastern "horse", had criticised Robertson's invitation to Balewa as "premature and inept" (Robertson 1974: 235). Robertson in turn remarked that Zik was probably disgruntled because he wanted to be the Prime Minister himself, which was not an unfair comment since Zik had, and had been, expected to lead independent Nigeria for the reason that he had fought for and won Nigeria's independence. Furthermore, he had the "largest supporters in the country north and south"

(Omoruyi 2001). Instead he was sidelined, “tricked” into resigning his seat in the House of Representatives and accepting the position of President of “the rubber stamp Senate.”

To understand how this came about, we need to bear in mind that the momentous 1959 elections produced no clear winner. None of the competing parties secured the required majority to independently form government, which meant that a coalition had to be formed. Osaghae argues that had national interest been a priority, NCNC (East) and AG (West) together with their alliance parties in the North (representing mostly ethnic minorities residing in the NPC-dominated North) would have been “in the best position to form a coalition” (1998: 32). That was because NCNC and AG had a much larger national spread in comparison to NPC (which only managed to secure token votes outside the North, and which furthermore “refused to be drawn out of its regional shell”). In the triumph of politics over reason, what emerged instead was an NCNC-NPC coalition and the installation of Balewa of NPC as the country’s first Prime Minister, a man “considered by some as a puppet to the Sardauna [of Sokoto]”, Sir Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, “the most powerful man in the north” (Hatch 1971: 219). That was followed by the political marginalisation of hundreds of minority ethnic groups and the “huge fraud” (Omoruyi 2001) that was Nigeria, born ‘deformed’, its entire political character and destiny spoilt by bad politics.



Why did an NCNC-AG coalition not eventuate? Robertson reasoned that NPC would not have countenanced a Southern government, which was what an NCNC-AG coalition would have been. Britain would not have countenanced it either, ostensibly for fear of the North pulling out of the federation and putting the entire independence plan in jeopardy if the North did not have (at least some) control of parliament. Osaghae points out that

once the favoured status of NPC was made clear, the question of coalition was no longer a theoretical one; it was simply which – the AG or the NCNC – the NPC leaders were willing to work with. (1998: 33)

What this means, in short, is that NPC had always-already forewon the elections, in the same way that the elections in Okri's *abiku* trilogy had been forewon by the unnamed political party which proudly proclaims through a loudspeaker that "VICTORY IS ALREADY OURS. WE HAVE WON. WE BRING POWER TO THE PEOPLE. WE BRING WEALTH AND STABILITY. THOSE WHO VOTE FOR US WILL ENJOY, THOSE WHO DON'T WILL EAT DUSTBINS!" (*IR* 228)

## **The Conspiracy: Fact or Fiction?**

This brings us back to the question we posed earlier: did Robertson have a hand in the North's forewinning of the elections? Was he, like Okri's Governor-General, the type who would, if he were guilty of treason against Nigeria, destroy "all the secret documents, all the evidence of important negotiations, the notes about dividing up the country, the new map of the nation, the redrawn boundaries, memos about meetings with religious leaders and political figures" (*IR* 36)? And was Okri alluding to Robertson and other key players when the murderers of Ade's father confess that

they had masters above them, a hierarchy of masters, who never committed crimes, whose hands were always clean, and who delegated the thoughts, the acts and the consequences of their crime and wickedness to lesser beings, to their minions, their servants and their disposable friends? (*IR* 57)

As if to preempt blame, Perham, in defence of Britain and Robertson, wrote:

It must be accepted that no British administration, handling the tense, final process of colonial emancipation, could have re-made situations which resulted from hasty frontier-making in the malleable Africa of the preceding [i.e. nineteenth] century. (1974: xiv)

Robertson, on his part, appears to have a clear conscience. Like Perham, he attributed Nigeria's failure to circumstances beyond his control. The country failed, he wrote, *despite* the perfectly-sound federal constitution – “freely negotiated and accepted by all the political party leaders” (Robertson 1974: 256) – which he had helped to create. The right structures were in place but “the force of tribalism was greater than anyone had estimated” (1974: 256). Furthermore “many of the politicians were corrupt and aimed at their own enrichment”. Robertson's argument is not without merit: tribalism and corruption was endemic. What he failed to mention, though, was that tribalism and corruption did not by themselves spontaneously appear, and that they were, according to one school of thought, largely the *effects* of his having created in the first place the political climate which gave the North the political upper-hand over its Southern neighbours.

The Eurocentric little which has been published on and by Robertson in the traditional paper-and-ink format does not directly attest to this, but there are in existence electronically published essays which claim that Whitehall (British civil service) officials had “freely admit[ted]” in private that they had rigged Nigeria's Independence Elections (Smith 1991-7). The author of these essays, Harold Smith, a man who says he is a former British Government senior civil servant at the Department of Labour in pre-independent Nigeria, alleges that he knew Robertson personally and that, for his refusal to remain quiet about Britain's

rigging of the 1959 elections, he had been threatened by Robertson, bribed by Margery Perham on Robertson's behalf, poisoned and subsequently 'erased' from the files of the British government.

Smith's charges are scandalous, to say the least, but do they bear up to scrutiny? To be sure, they have not been validated by the 'authorities' (academics, historians, etc.) and it remains unconfirmed if he is truly who he claims to be. That, we should stress, does not mean that his reassessment of Britain's role in Nigeria is necessarily fiction. Firstly, we should bear in mind that the internet has, in the last decade, become a crucial and credible new medium through which truths, hitherto repressed by dominant discourses, are set free. (Consider, as example, the home-grown Malaysian alternative portal, [malaysiakini.com](http://malaysiakini.com). Without it, English-reading Malaysians would be deprived of access to a dedicated source of news and views which offer a different perspective to those disseminated by government-controlled media.)

Secondly, it serves us well to remember that the British had committed the same act of treason in Malaya/Malaysia as it is accused of in Nigeria. As revealed in the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, "the British plan was to have an independent Malaya with Malays in charge – Malays who would nevertheless need them for some time to help govern the country and fight the communists" (1998: 225). Lastly, it should be noted that Smith's essays



do come across as authentic, filled as they are with elaborate details and first-hand inside information on the main players. Furthermore, they come complete with the reference numbers of letters from the British Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence granting Smith permission to publish the essays on the internet.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, these supporting factors do not by themselves confirm the accuracy of Smith's claims, just as historical narratives are not in themselves a "heaven of truths" (Badiou 2001: 43) simply because they are available in print. Thus, for the purposes of our discussion, Smith's account should at best be taken as a marginal counter-discourse that may well become hegemonic in the future. At the minimum, it serves as a compelling narrative that enables the reader to better appreciate *IR*'s anger at the wounding of the nation's destiny.

If official historical accounts only go so far as to suggest that Robertson may have inadvertently created a pre-independence political climate which favoured NPC, Smith's essays come right out to say that there was nothing inadvertent about it. It was not that "Sir James [Robertson] would do anything dishonourable on his own initiative to diminish or discredit Nigeria", Smith is careful to qualify in our email exchanges.<sup>35</sup> Rather, as "part of his code of duty and honour" as an officer, he was compelled to carry out Whitehall's and Westminster's orders without question. Smith explains in his essays that

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<sup>34</sup> Smith's essays are hyperlinked from <http://www.libertas.demon.co.uk>

<sup>35</sup> Our email exchanges took place in August 2000. Harold Smith may be reached at: [hsmith@libertas.demon.co.uk](mailto:hsmith@libertas.demon.co.uk).

The name of the game in handing over Nigeria to the pro-British North was to make safe a vulnerable target for Soviet penetration. An oppressed colony was assumed to be an obvious target for Soviet imperialism. A newly 'independent' nation safely inside the Commonwealth with moderate and responsible, i.e. pro-British leaders, would expand the free world. (1991-7)

Smith contends that although British attitude towards Nigeria was coloured by Lugard's pro-North racism, Britain still had good reasons to believe that an NPC-led government would give the newborn country the stability it needed. Furthermore, as was well-known at that time, there were fears that an NCNC-AG alliance would tempt Southern leaders to settle old scores with NPC. That by itself was likely to have plunged the country into chaos and paved the way for its infiltration by communists. But "we will never know" if the worst-case scenario might have eventuated since Britain had "flagrantly destroy[ed] Nigeria's first experiment in democracy" when it decided the winner well in advance of the independence elections (Smith 1991-4; 1991-7). Omo Omoruyi, an Africanist scholar, has also indirectly made the same point, underlining that Britain's fear that the Sardauna of Sokoto would "take his 'North' away" was illogical (2001). Although NCNC and AG were Southern parties, they had "representatives throughout the country including the North . . . So which 'North' would the Sardauna have taken away?" Besides, writes Omoruyi, "Who told Sir

James that the three political parties (NPC, NCNC and AG) could not work together as a transitional measure within the first four years after independence?"

The extent to which Britain went to secure victory for NPC as revealed in Smith's essays is astonishing. It did not merely involve a simple tweaking of the elections results but a systematic effort to cripple the leadership of NCNC and AG years in advance of the 1959 elections. Zik (leader of NCNC in the East), whose activities had been monitored by British intelligence for some time, was charged and found guilty in 1957 of having improperly handled public funds. All that is well known but what remains untold, Smith charges, is that Britain had deliberately "built in the legal loophole" which enabled Zik to use the funds to finance his political activities. Having thus set the trap, they allowed him to commit a minor breach which, over time, developed into a major misdemeanour. When the 'crime' became sufficiently serious, a tribunal was set up to find him guilty. Zik did not lose his Eastern support base as a result of the scandal (Crowder 1973: 291). But he had been politically neutered, for not only was he personally bankrupted, his "great NCNC, the vessel which would guarantee him power, [was left] drifting on to the rocks. The British had struck at his weak point, the money needed for political action" (Smith 1991-4). The same trap was laid for Obafemi Awolowo (Awo), leader of AG in Western Nigeria. In 1962, he was charged, found guilty and jailed for having diverted money from a government corporation to fund AG's political activities. According to historian John Hatch,

Awo's sentence was generally regarded as "a political trial" set up by his opponents, "particularly those in the federal government" [controlled by NPC], to ruin and remove him from public life (Hatch 1971: 227).

Smith's essays detail many more concrete examples of British chicanery. For our present purposes, let us select only a handful which directly highlight the Governor-General's complicity. Robertson, the essays reveal, was not a "blimp" that journalists who wrote about Nigeria's independence might have imagined, but "an Oxford-educated street fighter, experienced in covert intelligence, anti-Communist operations, terrorism and pulling the wool over inquisitive journalists' eyes" (Smith 1991-7). He was "a manufacturer, a retailer of phenomena" (*IR* 232). Many journalists had been lied to, others simply wanted to write about "the British empire's finest hour". And then there were scholars like Michael Crowder (author of *The Story of Nigeria*) who, according to Smith, not only knew about the rigging of the 1959 elections but was also blackmailed into writing a clean version of its history (1991-4). Smith claims that Crowder was a close friend and "a very promiscuous homosexual" whose "dangerous" lifestyle in Lagos was known to Robertson. He alleges that Robertson had used that knowledge against Crowder by asking him to persuade Smith to "stop dabbling in politics", i.e. to keep quiet about the elections rigging. Otherwise, Crowder might suddenly find himself embroiled in some sex scandal that would ruin his career. The end result



was that Crowder was forced to make his peace with Government House and thereafter omit vital facts from his book.

How should all this inflect our reading of the abiku trilogy? What would be the implications if we accept that the 'fictional' Governor-General in *IR* is Okri's allusion to Sir James Robertson, the last white Governor-General of Nigeria? And what is it that *IR* reveals but *TFR* and *SOE* do not? Firstly, it is important to note that *IR* does not merely afford the reader the strongest hints yet as to the identity of the unnamed and betrayed unborn nation around which the trilogy orbits. (From *TFR* and *SOE*, we already know that the said nation is, at one level of interpretation, an inference to Nigeria, Okri's home country.) More importantly, *IR* puts in historical context the possible reason why the unborn nation (Nigeria) is repeatedly described in *TFR* and *SOE* as always-already aborted. (Recall that the first two books lament the would-be nation's betrayal without revealing the specifics of the historical correlates). By repudiating the whitewashed dominant history of Nigeria (as recorded by the likes of Crowder, Perham and Robertson) and tangentially retracing what it posits as the repressed history of Nigeria's betrayal, *IR* retroactively recasts *TFR* and *SOE*, thus making it clear to the reader that while the abiku trilogy may be a work of fiction, it is neither detached from history and reality, nor lacking in political commitment, as certain critics claim. That it is *this* particular version of history that emerges from the trilogy (and not any other version which downplays British treason) also, by

implication, suggests Okri's political positionality vis-à-vis Nigeria's North-South debate. Like many other southern nationalists, he appears to reject the North's anti-democratic Islamist nationhood ideal – an ideal which, as we discussed in Chapter 2, envisions Nigeria becoming a great nation if each tribe were to adhere to its god-given purpose and place, and allow the leadership-endowed Northerners to rule the country.

### **A Deeper Realism**

In Okri, as the above discussion shows, fiction is not always distinguishable from reality. Fiction can enunciate an 'unthought' reality which although strictly speaking belongs to the realm of fiction, may yet prove to be more real than the hegemonic social reality it seeks to subvert. That is to say, it may prove that Nigeria's textbook history was the reality Nigerians never lived (*IFC* 297).

The third alternative is similarly detectable in Okri's 'magical realism' in the countless number of unearthly phenomena in the trilogy: the cast of spirit children (Azaro and Ade), the "invisible black insects" clinging to the Governor-General's body during the highly-anticipated political rally (*IR* 232), the spirits that borrow other people's bodies to attend the "fabulous masked ball in honour of Mr Harold Macmillan, prime minister of England" (145), and the angel who magically Africanised the Governor-General. On the one level, we know of

course that these in-between beings are not real and that they exist only as a literary device that enables Okri to tell a story. From the standard postcolonial standpoint, we might even say that they are discursive constructions whose function is to parenthesise absolutes (reality, norms, facts and so forth), dissolve borders and resist closure. Approaching Okri holistically, however, we will find that the aim of Okri's literary inscription of the magical in the trilogy is not simply to academically underscore the discursivity of 'hard reality' and deconstruct it. Rather, as will be made clear, *the aim to heal-reconcile the nation(-peoples) at the level of the signifier*. Before we delve into the specifics of the political in Okri's use of the magical, let us first analyse 'magical realism' as it is popularly understood and consider if *TFR*, *SOE* and *IR* fit the description.

That magical realist texts are potentially subversive is a point most critics will acquiesce to with little hesitation. As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris put it, their "in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures" (1995a: 6). Because Okri's magical works exhibit these characteristics, critics have aligned him with a diverse international range of magical realist writers including Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Robert Kroetsch, Wilson Harris and Günter Grass. There is logic in categorising Okri alongside these writers; at the minimum, they all construct fictional worlds that do not quite follow the laws the universe as we

know them (Faris 1995: 167). The underside of this lumping together of writers from diverse cultures, however, is that they tend to be seen as practitioners of a “flourishing trend” and an “*international* mode” of representing-subverting *local* realities (emphasis added, Zamora and Faris 1995a: 4-5). This top-down approach is problematic because it creates the misleading impression that the magical in magical realist texts is external to the local/traditional resource base. In addition, it implies that the function of the magical is purely instrumental, that its primary role is to amplify the respective writers’ non-magical local concerns. In short, the approach runs the risk of turning magical realist writings into a product of glocalisation<sup>36</sup>, i.e. a global commodity (magical realism) with a local face (local cultural-political content).

‘Glocalised magical realism’ is arguably an apt description for magical realist texts by writers from cultural milieus where the magical is external rather than integral to their constitution. Take, for example, the case of *What the Crow Said* by English-Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch. To the extent that there is little if any magical element which is integral to English-Canadian culture and belief system, we may argue that the magical in Kroetsch’s novel functions purely as a top-down decentering discursive strategy. By contrast, Okri’s trilogy may be described as a bottom-up literary textualisation of the magical. That is to say, the

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<sup>36</sup> See Holton (1998: 16) and Robertson (1995).



magical is derived not from external sources but from indigenous beliefs (the Nigerian abiku phenomenon, the Yoruba concept of predestination and so forth) that are central to the community upon which the trilogy is based. It is for this reason that Okri says the magical in his work is “not magic” at all but “a deeper kind of realism” (Blishen 1988) and “a dimension of the spiritual” (Falconer 1997: 46). As he explains:

I’m looking at the world in *The Famished Road* from the inside of the African world view, but without it being codified as such. This is just the way the world is seen: the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on. It’s quite simple and straightforward. I’m treating it *naturally*. It’s a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions. (emphasis added, Ross 1993: 337-8)

Okri’s claim that he has rendered reality “naturally” is not unjustified. It is only natural for a spirit child like Azaro to see spirits, and for Dad who practises ancestor-worship to call upon his ancestors for assistance in times of trouble. Besides, the spirit world in the trilogy is not dreamt up willy-nilly but corresponds to the three-tiered Yoruba/Igbo spiritual cosmology comprising the ancestral plane, the sphere of higher spirits and the interspatial nomansland where spirit-eaters reside (Achebe 1986: 11). Okri’s claim to naturalness only becomes problematic when we come to *SOE* and *IR*. Ato Quayson correctly notes that,

unlike *TFR*, “the real world and the esoteric” in *SOE* (and *IR*, we might add) are so deeply interpenetrative that not only Azaro but “all characters have equal access to the world of spirits” (1995a: 154). Here we should qualify, though, that the characters do not always-really “see dead people” (to borrow the famous phrase from M. Night Shyamalan’s film *The Sixth Sense*). An attentive reading will show that the magical are sometimes merely hearsay or unverifiable allegations: “*People* saw antelopes with aquamarine eyes running through them, as if they were ghosts”; “A woman *claimed* that while walking she had slipped into another world” (emphases added, *SOE* 151, 166).

There are, however, magical events which cannot be put down as mere allegation since they literally happen before the reader’s eyes. Take the butterfly-burning episode in *SOE*. Following the terror and devastation unleashed by the political forces, the compound people are amazed to find a mysterious avalanche of dead butterflies falling on every visible surface. Some are almost certain the world is ending soon. Others hallucinate in fear, “a new colossal helplessness” awakened in them (*SOE* 155). They all become ill for lack of dream until Dad, growing impatient, hustles and commands the inhabitants of the compound with great vigour and “the voice of a soldier who had received his mandate from the crisis of the moment” (163). He gets them to collect the dead butterflies and dump them in a pile, after which he drenches the heap with kerosene and sets fire to it. “As the flames lit up the darkness, flaring erratically, *we* [the compound people

including Azaro and his family] gasped in terror and amazement at seeing spirits rising into the air on golden plumes of smoke" (*SOE* 164).

Is the above a case of collective hallucination? If so, can we say the same about the scene in *IR* where Dad, languishing in a boiling cell after being arrested by the police, suddenly finds himself "in the very presence of an unbearable fire which was roasting his being and brain, turning all that he was into living ashes" (*IR* 54)? What about the "gold dust" which the jailers find matted in Dad's hair and the "diamond powder" clinging to his face (55)? It would not be difficult to come up with symbolic interpretations of the above events. For instance, it may be argued that the butterfly-burning scene signifies the compound people's spiritual awakening and the renewal of their capacity to perceive the world around them in more than three dimensions. Dad's consumption by fire, by contrast, may be read as a fiery manifestation of his inner spirit and symbolic of the extreme purification required by the nation to "burn away [its] corruptions" (*IR* 53). (Okri has said that fire is one of his temperaments and the quality behind all his work (Hattersley 1999)). It is also equally possible to read the scene as inaugurating yet another one of Dad's symbolic rebirths, a re-origination of self through the baptism of fire.

Many more similar interpretations may be drawn from these two episodes if we keep to the same literary-critical approach. What the approach is unable to

produce, however, is the illumination required to tackle the naïve but crucial question we posed earlier: how real are these magical phenomena? Should we approach them on the primary level as coded inscriptions or literal representations to be taken at their face value, that is, events registered as actually occurring ‘before our very eyes’. To what extent are they reflective of the African worldview as conceived by Okri? Are they a faithful presentation of reality from the traditional African standpoint, or have they been stylised-magnified as Quayson suggests? The evidence we have examined suggests that Okri does not always faithfully replicate traditional beliefs. Recall, for instance, his rewriting of the traditional conception of destiny which we discussed in Chapter 3. Rather than placing destiny in the hands of the External Divine, he invests it in the human agent. The rewriting is relatively minor since only one detail is tweaked. The result, though, is far-reaching since destiny is the most crucial element that holds the entire spiritual universe together. By investing destiny in the agent, Okri has quite terroristic inverted the traditional universe.

## **Words Are Things**

The impossibility of formulating a ‘one size fits all’ interpretative solution to the magical allows for the reader to “multiply the possibilities of interpretation of a work [e.g. the abiku trilogy], to open up a work, to illuminate the world of a work; not to reduce it and to diminish it” (Okri, in Falconer 1997: 50). From the



standpoint of literary criticism, the infinite dialogue between the reader and the text can only be a positive good. What we have to bear in mind here, though, is that the openness of Okri's writings is not the aim but the *result* of his strategic thwarting the reader's desire to permanently capture their meaning. Okri's aim is not to show that the magical in the trilogy is distinct from the real but to put it to the reader that, within and without the universe of the fiction, "what is perceived and said are real things too" (Okri, in Hattersley 1999). To clarify what we are proposing here, let us first look at what Okri says regarding the relation between the magical in his writings and the Nigerianness of his personal reactions:

I still believe that words are things . . . If you were to say that tonight's poetry reading would be a failure, I would ask you to withdraw it for fear that saying it would make it happen. Words resonate. They are parallel to events. It is magical thinking. Not what many critics have called magical reality. That is an exaggeration of reality, a transformation of reality. (Hattersley 1999)

Okri's proposition that words (thought-perception) can somehow magically shape or jinx events in real life, or that a "single thought of ours can change the universe" (Dad, in *TFR* 497), is likely to cause the cynic to roll his eyes and mutter 'silly superstition'. (The same cynic would most likely categorise the proposition in the same box as the well-known Chinese superstition which

says that the number eight is 'luckier' than four.<sup>37</sup>) However, if we reformulate it as 'Can discourse construct the reality or meaning of an event?', we will see that what is at issue here is, as Okri maintains, not magic (superstition, the supernatural, etc.) but the primacy of the signifier, that is, the way signifiers form signifying chains which in turn constitute discourse, and how discourse structures our thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, fantasies and ultimately reality itself.

From as early as *Stars of the New Curfew* (SONC) (1989), Okri has paid special attention to the (political) function of the signifier, particularly the way in which an 'event' (as a floating signifier that bears neither absolute non-fixity nor absolute fixity of meaning) can be sutured to any number of signifieds to produce an infinite series of meanings and 'facts'. As we discussed in Chapter 1, in this language game, the meaning most likely to become hegemonic is the one that privileges those in the position of power. This much is cynically acknowledged by the nameless protagonist in Okri's short story 'Stars of the New Curfew': "Those who get on in society, those who rise high and affect events, do so by manipulating, by manufacturing reality" (SONC 117). In *IR*, one of the palpable illustrations of the discursive construction of reality is found in the Governor-General's writing of his memoir. The writing is not merely an inscription of personal observations on Africa and Africans from the perspective of a powerful

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<sup>37</sup> In Chinese/Cantonese belief, eight symbolises prosperity. Number four, on the other hand, symbolises death.

colonial civil servant. Rather, it represents racist colonial discourse which overwrote the continent's past and altered its present (*IFC* 112).

Local elites of all tribal groups too are capable of employing words to manufacture reality. Take the episode in *IR* where Mum rises and falls out of prominence by the stroke of a pen. It all begins with her having staged a successful protest which leads to Dad's release from prison. The newspapers applaud her courage and she soon becomes a national figure. Mum's sudden and unexpected rise is accompanied by positive changes. For the first time, we see her taking a keen interest in politics and speaking of "all the things she had always been silent about" (*IR* 34). On a platform hastily built on top of battered cars, she speaks in six languages on freedom and justice, independence and the end of tribalism, the unity and liberty of all women, and the special ways of African women. Rather amusingly, the deeper she immerses herself in politics, the more she becomes like Dad. Overtaken by fame and turning "loud-voiced", she speaks of becoming a wrestler *and* a politician (76). Her "new life", "greater opportunity" and "new freedom" are, however, unexpectedly snatched away when the newspapers, in an about-face manoeuvre, begin reporting that Dad was actually freed by a group of elite women (67). Infuriated by the news when she gets wind of it, Mum quickly sets out to correct the lie but to no avail. She subsequently learns that the leader of the vampiric elite women has become a politician and an official candidate of a political party.

On a larger scale, a similar reinvention of reality is found in the newspaper reporting of the much-anticipated political rally. Although the rally was an utter failure and literally a bloody riot, it is reported by “the new powers of the era” (*IR* 296) as “an unqualified success” (297), while the people’s protest is reported as “overwhelming support for the Party of the Rich” (297). To add to the air of authenticity, the report even carries accompanying photographs of the crowd at the rally – their faces beaming, their expressions intent and hopeful. The entire manufacturing process is so well coordinated that “we [the compound people] began to think of ourselves as hypocrites. We began to imagine that we had indeed been peaceful at the rally, that we had colluded in our cowardice by inventing the alternative ending, the disruptions, the burnings, the rage, the ten people dead” (*IR* 297).<sup>38</sup> From these examples, it is clear why Okri maintains that “what is perceived and said are real things too”. Although words (signifying chains, thought-perceptions) are abstractions devoid of positive existence, they are real insofar as they are capable of bringing about concrete changes that can profoundly affect lives.

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<sup>38</sup> As further illustration of the invention of reality, we might recall the episode in *TFR* following the milk-poisoning incident. The Party of the Rich unleashes terrible violence upon the compound but “nothing of the events appeared in the newspapers” (*TFR* 183). According to Azaro says, it was “as if the events were never real”. In the absence of words to concretise reality, real events take on “the status of rumours”, causing the compound people to wonder if they have not collectively dreamt up the fevers of the night.



## Narrating the Nation

In Okri, the subject lives and dies by the signifier. Without *logos*, there is no subjectivity, no *homo fabula* or “story-telling beings” (Okri 1996a: 24), and no “meaning – apprehension – comprehension” (1996a: 22). “Without stories we would go mad. Life would lose its moorings and lose its orientation” (1996a: 25).

In *Birds of Heaven*, Okri writes that

It is through the fictions and stories we tell ourselves and others that we live the life, hide from it, harmonise it, canalise it, have a relationship with it, shape it, accept it, are broken by it, redeem it, or flow with the life. (1996a: 24-5)

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It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world. (1996a: 34)

As the subject lives and dies by the signifier, so too the nation. This is clearly conveyed by Okri who writes that “Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies” (Okri 1996a: 21). By “fictions and

stories”, Okri means discourse in all its varied forms: parables, fables, songs, religious messages, history, “tribal myths of supremacy” (*SOE* 20) and so forth. Constituted by language, these forms belong to the same category as Kant’s transcendental Idea and Lacan’s notion of the fantasy, that is, fictions which regulate the universe of our self-experience and literally “sustain our being-in-the-world, our dwelling within the symbolic universe” (Žižek 2000d: 82). Without them, reality itself will lose its discursive-logical consistency.

Similarly, in Lacan, there is no subject without language. The Lacanian subject is, if we recall, not a flesh-and-blood individual, the consciously thinking ‘I’ (the ego, Cartesian subject) or the unconscious but that which one signifier represents to another signifier. Constitutively and literally the *gap* separating the conscious and the unconscious, the subject by definition exists in a state of discord between knowledge and being. That is to say, it “exists only so long as it does not ‘register’, ‘take note of’ its non-existence – like the proverbial cat from the cartoons which, although it has no ground under its feet, is unaware of it and so calmly continues to walk in the air” (Žižek 1996c: 280). Applying this logic to the nation-peoples in Okri’s trilogy, we might say that the tribal members of the unborn undead nation do not exist, and that their misrecognition of their nonexistence as tribal members is the cause of the unborn nation’s undeadness. They cling to “the comforting shapes of legends, no matter how monstrous or useless” (*IR* 32). They look at “shapes of [their] ordinary reality and didn’t see the

things perceived, but only the myths [they] brought to them.” They think they exist because they have yet to recognise that the tribal Other to be antagonised-negated is but “a *semblant*” (Miller 1990: xxx), a distraction which fascinates-repulses them to the point where they overlook their own nonexistence. So long as misrecognise that, the nation will continue to exist as a suffering undead.

## **Part III**

**K.S. MANIAM**

### **Two Novels**

Karma is no more rebirth after death, controlled by metaphysical forces, but the transformation of personality undertaken by conscious choice. (Maniam 1987: 220)



## ***THE RETURN***

### **Trilogy of the Eternal Return**

For all their acknowledged similarities, K.S. Maniam's *The Return* (*TR*) and *In a Far Country* (*IFC*) – the two novels we will examine in Part III – are almost always read separately. This approach is not unwarranted since *TR* and *IFC* are strictly speaking self-contained works. The shortcoming of this approach, however, is that because it takes *TR* and *IFC* as independent works, it has from the outset foreclosed the possibility that the writings may be more intimately related than a casual intertextual reading would suggest, and that there is, as it turns out, an authorially intended and textually supported unifying logic that binds *TR* and *IFC* together as two thirds of a 'trilogy' which concludes with the unpublished *Delayed Passage* (*DP*).<sup>39</sup>

By 'trilogy', we have in mind something other than the standard conception. In contrast to Okri's abiku trilogy, Maniam's trilogy is neither held

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<sup>39</sup> Maniam has put the publication of the completed *DP* on an indefinite hold. He has since completed another novel, *Between Lives* (*BL*), which he expects to bring out in the second half of 2002. See Appendix 1 and 2 for synopses of *DP* and *BL*.

together by the same characters nor a contiguous plot but by the preoccupation of each text with the protagonist's (political) struggle to eject into the past the curse of the 'eternal return'. In Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science*, the eternal return (or the 'eternal recurrence of the same') is described as a life that has been lived before and that has to be lived "innumerable times" more (Nietzsche 1974: 273). In each repetition, there will be "nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great [will return] all in the same succession and sequence." Scholars including Karl Lowith (1997) and Matthew Rampley (2000) have argued that between the two opposite poles of possible interpretations – fatalism on the one side and freedom on the other – Nietzsche is located on the latter side, advocating that life be lived "in every moment so that you could will that moment back again over and over" (Lowith 1997: 85).

In Maniam, by contrast, the eternal return or what is referred to in *IFC* as an "eternity of repetition" (*IFC* 43) is neither life-affirming, "divine" (Nietzsche 1974: 273) nor the affliction of just one individual. Instead, it manifests itself first and foremost as a family 'curse' that affects each and every generation down the bloodline. To inherit it – as each of the central Indian Malaysian protagonists in the trilogy suspect they have – is to be condemned to repeat their immigrant forebear's failure to find "some elusive rootedness" (*IFC* 40) in Malaya/Malaysia and in "that vast country . . . called life" (144). Despite having escaped the abject

poverty of plantation life, and despite having made it further than their immigrant forebear could only have dreamed of (by attaining white collar dignity, career and material success, ownership of a home), the protagonists continue to suffer from a crippling incapacity for happiness. Always and somehow, any enjoyment that comes their way is “ruined or tainted by simultaneous feelings of dissatisfaction or displeasure” (Fink 1997: 210-1). Like the haunted male figures in Edvard Munch’s iconic works, all of which are rooted in a single inquiry “Why was there a curse on my cradle?” (Munch, in Gibson 1988: 157), Maniam’s anti-heroes are depressed and prone to brood on the past and such brow-knitting subjects as loss and alienation. Adding to this is an unbearable anxiety that haunts them, a disquieting feeling that life has somehow been compromised and the price exacted is the thwarting of their “deep seated desire for a home” (*IFC* 28).

The pattern of the blind and endless repetition of the past is also reflected in the trilogy’s overall temporal plotting. In *TR*, Ravi in his young adulthood takes stock of all that he has gained and lost in his lifelong pursuit of the “dignity of the individual” (*TR* 141) and escape from the fate of his father and grandmother who both went to the grave broken-hearted for failing to “earn a home in this land” (*TR* 140). This the reflective Ravi does from a point in time in the 1960s, when he looks as far back as the two decade preceding Malaysia’s independence in 1957. *IFC*, the second novel, is similarly premised. The protagonist Rajan, a successful middle-aged businessman, traverses the same temporal distance as Ravi but from

a point in time between the 1970s and the 1980s, in his quest to come to terms with the forces that have (mis)shaped his life and “trapped and killed [his] father” (*IFC* 66). And in the mid 1990s in *DP*, Kumar, an academic at a retiring age who was “forced to retire ignobly from the university” (*DP* 6), confronts “the past he has avoided” in order to retrace “his straying [from] the true path of self-fulfilment” (*DP* 2). The process takes him as far back as the 1940s, a time when Malaysia was Malaya, and the people were subjugated to British and Japanese imperial forces.

From this brief mapping of the trilogy, two distinct patterns may be discerned. The first and more immediately apparent is the way the trilogy is structured to convey a calendrical sense of time’s passing. From *TR* to *IFC* and finally to *DP*, the narrative present (the point in time at which the respective protagonists/narrators speak) advances closer to our own present. And as it does, so too the protagonist of each subsequent novel ‘matures’, paralleling Malaysia’s coming of age as a nation. Indeed, it is the nation’s independence and modernisation, its opening up of “a whole new world” (*TR* 132) of opportunities that has helped made it possible for the protagonists to escape the oppressive backwaters whence they came, and to become professionals in their own right. The second discernable pattern is the circular time of the eternal return. Notice how the *same* attempt at reconciliation with the past recurs in nearly *every* successive decade following Malaysia’s independence. Rationally we know, of



course, that the protagonists are three. Yet it would be difficult not to think of them at some level as one and the same, caught in circular time, compelled to forlornly encircle the past until some form of release and redemption is found.

Why, despite the protagonists' best efforts to cancel out the eternal return, do they continue to suffer from the same curse of alienation which plagued their immigrant forefathers *when they themselves are not immigrants*? Why, like their forefathers, do they keep longing for the inaccessible elsewhere, "that country that does not exist" but which they nevertheless bear in their dreams (Kristeva 1991: 5)? What does it take to break the cycle? End one's life by consuming weedkiller like the despairing rubber estate women in *IFC*? Our exploration of these questions, it should be signalled from the outset, will break from the standard approach which insists on the necessity of interpreting Maniam's works through Hindu symbology. As will become clear, this is a necessary step since one of the objects of our interrogation is Hinduism itself – or rather the Hindu/Indian Thing towards which Maniam's characters entertain an extimate relationship.

### **Entangled Desires: Critics, Author, Narrator**

By way of unravelling the key issues raised above, let us begin with Tang Soo Ping's paradigmatic reading of *TR* in which she argues that the problem with Ravi, the protagonist, is that he "cannot perceive a more hopeful solution to his

problem" (1993: 85). He rejects "all symbols of proprietorship" valued by Naina and Periathai, respectively his father and grandmother (1993: 84). He ignores "the hearty passion and robust expressiveness of his Indian culture" (1993: 85). Most damning of all, he allows himself to be mentally colonised through the colonial education system by the "rapacious", "degenerate" and "impoverished" English culture (1996: 7). This, according to Tang, makes Ravi "more of a failure than Naina or Periathai" (1993: 86). Whereas the latter at least have the "Indian sensibility . . . [to nurture] . . . an intense response to the new land, a passionate desire to belong", Ravi only approaches life with half a commitment, hence his ending up with a "tightly insulated, sterile" life in which "the means to freedom – the English language – is little more than a sanitizing and dulling agent" (1993: 85). In Tang's opinion, Ravi's failure in life is ultimately Maniam's failure as a writer:

Like most Malaysian works, [TR] is as yet unable to encompass that wider perspective that may be achieved with age and experience. For the marginal life can open the door to new vistas of meaning and understanding. One only has to look at Ellison's *Invisible Man* to realize the exciting possibilities of a freer and more searching outlook. (1993: 89)

In Tang's revisitation of the subject in a later essay (1996) , she changes her stand slightly. She concedes that Ravi sees the light after all, as reflected by his having written and completed his autobiography. "The process of writing",

Tang writes, “mirrors Ravi’s maturation, and signals the tremendous glimpse of a tradition which may bring him closer to his people and to the new land” (1996: 11). He “becomes aware” in the end that his “desire to tap a foreign culture from afar [has] deprived him of that sustenance and enrichment available close to home” (1996: 11-2).

Many of Tang’s observations are to the point. There are, as she rightly highlights, blind-spots in Ravi’s evolving consciousness. Ravi’s “aggressive, intellectualized attitude” towards life is, as Maniam himself concedes, “reductive in . . . scope” (Maniam 1987: 222). Periathai’s and Naina’s desire to belong does have a hint of spirituality about it – as does Ravi’s, as we shall see. Unlike Ellison’s fictional universe (and Okri’s where the wretchedness of marginality is always at least minimally ameliorated), Maniam’s world is largely one of eternally contracting light. As a reviewer once put it, any luminescence that manages to penetrate the darkness of Maniam’s world, insofar as one perceives it as luminescent at all, is (always invariably) hard-won (Lang Bulan 1995). Finally the two forces which Tang pits against one another – the ‘bad’ (colonial/west) and the ‘good’ (Indian) – do play a pivotal role in Ravi’s life. However, for her to plot the trajectory of Ravi’s life passage as one proceeding from utopian contentment to radical alienation and finally to the awakening of the desire to reclaim his Indian roots, and to *then* surmise that *TR* is “inward-looking” and “predictably

fixated on the ethnic [Indian] theme" (Tang 1993: 83) is to miss the point of the novel entirely.

The thrust of Tang's critique of *TR* exemplifies critics' tendency to dismiss Ravi's crisis as a handiwork of colonialism, quasi-idealise and at times directly or otherwise disclaim any idealising of Periathai's "mythological" struggle and the "glamorous Indian past" she is said to embody (Wicks 1997: 390; also see Tang 1996), and to then finally conclude that *TR* demonstrates Ravi's "desire to re-establish racial and ethnic origins" (Brewster 1988: 178) – or worse still, "the possibility of renewal . . . through a return to religious values" (Lim 1984: 42). What this line of argument does is to almost completely ignore the complexities of belonging and the perils of self-insularity – two themes that are foundational to *TR* and almost all of Maniam's major works. In addition, it fails to appreciate the epic significance of Ravi's twofold life passage: first, from a compromised life in an oppressed working class Tamil community to a dignified existence only the less unfortunate can afford; and second, from naive sense-certainty towards possession of the kind of ethical self-knowledge that liberates. Indeed, a closer examination of the reasoning behind the argument we dispute would also reveal how closely it resembles the disturbingly popular 'nationalist' argument in Malaysia that to acquire and use the English language is to betray the national/Malay language, culture, religion and even the nation. Even worse is how it recalls the insular logic which political chauvinists in the country employ in



calling for a national return to core Malay values as a means of repurifying the race from the corrupting influences of outsiders.

It would not be entirely speculative to suggest that critics taking the above line of argument may have in part been injudiciously inspired by certain comments Maniam has made. Maniam has for example said in an interview that Ravi “shows the glimmering of a return to his culture” (Wilson 1993: 17). But he has also added that Ravi “cannot entirely go back to the old culture for he cannot eradicate from his consciousness the [English] language and education that he has acquired” (1993: 18).<sup>40</sup> What Ravi can do is attempt to combine the “two worlds”. The curious phrasing (*cannot . . . go back, cannot eradicate*) suggests that Maniam actually sees himself as having scripted Ravi into a position where he chooses to combine the two worlds *after* coming to terms with the impossibility of his *true* desire to access the inaccessible (the “old culture”) and to eradicate the ineradicable (the imprint of the new/foreign culture on his psyche). In short, what Maniam’s statement appears to convey is that Ravi *does* desire to return to his roots. With this apparent authorial encouragement, it is not difficult to see why some critics find it unnecessary to question if *the text itself* actually supports the view that Ravi “shows the glimmering of a return to his culture”.

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<sup>40</sup> Maniam’s qualification here recalls Anne Brewster’s argument that “*The Return* ... suggests the desire to re-establish racial and ethnic origins but this nostalgia is mixed with the sober realization of the impossibility of this quest” (1988: 178).

Critics' inclination to agree with Maniam does not seem to be motivated by the naïve belief that 'authors know best'. Despite Maniam insistence that "I'm not writing 'autobiographical fiction'" (Yong 1992: 67), *TR* continues to be 'secretly' read as Maniam's autobiography disguised as Ravi's. (If Ravi is Maniam, then who would know more about Ravi than Maniam himself?) It is not without reason that even a veteran critic like Anne Brewster should repeatedly describe *TR* as "K.S. Maniam's autobiographical novel" instead of Ravi's (1988: 173). As is known to those familiar with Maniam's writings, Ravi's life is almost identical to Maniam's. Both come from a working class background, grew up in a small isolated town and went to a Tamil school for a brief period before they were transferred to an English school. As well, they both completed a teacher-training course in England. Indeed the two figures are so similar that Heather Neilson might just be right when she says that "the question of where the autobiographical material begins and ends" is ultimately unanswerable "without recourse to Maniam himself" (1999: 99). In the here and now, however, the problem remains: what are we to make of the situation where critics, while overtly engaging with *TR* as a work of *fiction*, quietly slip in and out of reading Ravi's textual desire as determined by and indistinguishable from Maniam's extratextual desire, and Maniam's comments on *TR* as more authoritative than the text itself?

## Big Mother

One should always bear in mind that due to the brevity and fragmentary nature of the few available essays by and interviews with Maniam, what might come across as the author's personal interpretation of his works is not always commensurate with his overarching thematic commitment. Neither is it always unambivalently borne out in his corresponding literary texts. In the latter part of this chapter, we will return to examine in detail how this relates to the negative reception Ravi typically receives. For now, let us consider the issue in relation to Periathai ('Big Mother'), the first generation immigrant whose portrayal is inspired by Maniam's real life grandmother:

Periathai is not only Ravi's grandmother but also the source of his intellectual, emotional and, particularly, spiritual development . . . [She] represents the spiritual strength and vision of a people [as well as] rhythm and vitality, characteristics often associated with creativity in Hindu mythology. (Maniam 1987: 221-2)

Following Maniam, many critics too have focussed on Periathai's nobler aspects. Undoubtedly, Periathai is a "remarkable woman" whose "tenacity and resourcefulness in starting life anew with her family in a strange land" can only be admired (Brewster 1988: 173). She is the only person in Ravi's life who encourages him to complete his secondary schooling and the only one who, despite her meagre resources, is prepared to see him through financially. This, at a

time when his father Naina would neither support nor discourage him, and when his unpredictable mother-substitute Karupi and the tyrannical 'estate' superior Ayah are maliciously bent on cutting short his education (*TR* 101-10). Also, as is often highlighted, it is from Periathai that Ravi learns "never [to] let anything break [his] spirit" (*TR* 7). Notwithstanding, it would be difficult to not also recognise that the same tenacity and resourcefulness that make Periathai a remarkable figure have also been utterly ineffectual in helping her obtain the one thing she desires above all else: legal ownership of her illegally-built house which has been marked for demolition by the town council. They could not save her from dying the way she does, pining away in consumption, "speechless, her eyes never spoke a farewell" (*TR*10). Lastly, they could not take away the reasons that make her bitterly vow to return after death and "never stop haunting the place" (*TR* 8). (Later in the chapter, we will see that it is a vow she is to indirectly fulfil with tragic consequences.)

It would be fair to say that Periathai would most likely pass away in peace (or at least without the excessive emotional violence) had she not clung to the house. She has lived fully and resourcefully, and she has done her best to establish as secure a ground as possible for her family to hopefully prosper in the new country. In all, one might say that she has not fared too badly, especially if we consider how she first came "with nothing except some baggage and three boys [her sons] in tow" (*TR* 1). So if, as it appears, Periathai has neither regrets nor



unfinished business, how then do we account for her hysterical reaction to the eviction? Why, prior to her demise, does she deliriously blubber about the sea, melancholically croon to it, “beseeching for a safe passage with her tin trunks” (*TR* 10)? How is it that a woman who has taken worse in her stride (cross-continent migration, the communist threat, the Japanese occupation) and whose spirit has hitherto been indomitable can suddenly turn so emotionally cankerous over a house? Recall that even though she suffers from terminal cancer, it is not until the town council “got to her” (*TR* 8) that she starts to lose weight and hasten to her death.

It goes without saying that anyone whose house is about to be torn down by the authorities is bound to be distraught. With Periathai, however, her over-reaction does not seem to stem from the fear of losing the roof over her head or being turned into a destitute. If she so desired, she could have packed up and moved elsewhere, or perhaps even bought a new place to spend her remaining days preparing herself spiritually for her impending death, as traditional Hindus typically do. Money, if it is an obstacle, does not appear insurmountable, as may be inferred from Naina’s attempt to purchase the property for her, albeit unsuccessfully because it “isn’t for sale” (*TR* 133). At worst, she could have moved in with Naina and the family. What then is it about the house that makes it so special?

For Periathai, the house whose legal title she hopes to receive at no cost “on the grounds that she had occupied [it] long enough to be its rightful heir” (*TR* 8) is clearly not just a physical shelter or even a home to be sentimentally cherished. Judging from the obsessive way she clings to it, it is as if the house is in her mind’s eye the Thing that promises to saturate her with the pleasure of ‘arriving’, legitimise her way of life and affirm her self-identity as a Hindu-Indian. Here we should first clearly distinguish between the impossible-real Thing (*das Ding*), Periathai’s Thing and the really-existing house. The first describes the empty place around which her world of desires turns and to which she relates “in a dimension of loss, regret and nostalgia” (Fachinelli 1996). Periathai’s very own Thing is, by contrast, a tangible object (a house in this case) which she has personally elevated to the level of the sublime Thing, fetishised as something worth dying for. From Ravi, we know that her house is quintessentially Hindu-Indian. In it, traditional Hindu rituals are regularly performed and festivals celebrated. All these, according to Ravi, go to recreate “the thick spiritual and domestic air [Periathai] must have breathed there [in India]” (*TR* 6). Structurally, the house has “an old-fashioned, Indian cooking place” (*TR* 4) and a yard covered with *kolam* (threshold drawings) which sociosymbolically functions as “a visual index of the good Hindu woman” who created them (Kavuri 1998). As well, there are the four wooden pillars whose timber faces feature exquisite carvings of stories from the *Ramayana*:

Rama challenged, bow and arrow at the ready, yet his brow lined with anxiety for the missing Sita. The sculptured, fold-like flames envelop Ravana's palace and threaten to engulf Sita's tender, shapely limbs and breasts. One pillar carried the creation of the Ganges, the cascading water stilled, another the typical, rustic look of the Indian village. (TR 4)

Because Periathai's house-Thing has taken on higher functions in her world of desires (as the positivisation of her lack, and the object around which her Hindu-Indian identity is structured and to which her desire is bound), it follows that the negation of one would also be the negation of the other. This would explain why Periathai reacts to the demolition threat as if what is at stake is not merely a house but the very centre of her world – her Hindu-Indian Thing, in short. To recapitulate: if the house is precious only insofar as Periathai fetishises it, if her tenacious clinging to it is but a displaced gesture of her overpassionate, unconscious attachment to her Hindu-Indian self, and if this attachment is the reason which hinders her from finding belongingness within herself and to the new land, then would it not follow that the standard treatment of Periathai as the sacred Ideal against which the 'useless' Ravi must but cannot measure up ought to be reassessed?

The fact that Periathai fails to belong does not of course negate her worth as an individual. Neither, however, is it as inconsequential as implied by the

curiously scant attention it has received, nor is it as life-affirming as it has been made out to be at other times. Consider, for example, Peter Wicks' analysis. First he claims that "the story of Periathai serves to confirm Edward Said's view of narrative as 'the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history'" (1997: 390). In the next sentence, he quizzically brackets the empowerment thesis by highlighting the irreconcilable gap between Periathai's strength and her failure to establish legal ownership of her house. Then instead of entering into what could have been a fertile discussion on the gap he appears to have unwittingly introduced, Wicks rather oddly concludes with only a hint of argument that "the semi-mythical" Periathai is a more "captivating" and "intriguing" character than Ravi (1997: 392). In contrast, Tang's reading is even more surprising. Not only does she not recognise Periathai's failure as failure, she even inverts it into her triumph, a symbol of her omnipotence. Periathai, Tang writes, "achieves some kind of mythological stature" that identifies her more as a "folk-[hero]" than a "defeated, homeless [exile]" (1996: 9). (Note that what we disagree with here is not the treatment of Periathai as a symbol of transplanted Indianness, 'a little piece of India' in Malaya. Rather it is the haste with which some critics brush aside the contradictions in her characterisation and raise her to the level of Indian Goodness.)

The tendency of critics to treat the flesh-and-blood and warts-and-all Periathai as a mere appendix to the abstract Ideal warrants a comparison with the



practice of mother fetishisation in popular Indian cinema. In the latter context, the mother is invariably made to bear the burden of Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana* and the quintessential Hindu figure of ideal womanhood (Kakar 1981: 63-71). On screen, she is “a fount of love, protection [and] traditional morality” (Thomas 1995: 158). Above all, she is Mother India, the self-sacrificing guardian of Indianness and defender against the “cold, calculating, rapacious . . . West/outsider” (1995: 160). To cinemagoers who have grown accustomed to the maternal norm, it is simply inconceivable and unacceptable that she should be portrayed ‘out of character’. Indian filmmaker Gopi Rorha had apparently so horrified cinemagoers with *Kaaren* (‘Reason’, 1981) when he portrayed the mother as a prostitute who is eventually killed by her own son that screening of the film ceased after three days because no one wanted to watch it (Thomas 1995: 164). *Kaaren* is of course an exception rather than the rule. Indian cinemagoers’ desire to avoid any psychosocial anxiety that may arise from being subjected to ‘disturbing’ scenes (e.g. uncharacteristic representations of the mother) is almost always met by filmmakers’ eagerness to cater to their enjoyment (Dickey 1993: 67). Between the two, there is normally a tacit understanding on how characters ought to find representation on screen. The burly leather-clad villain may drink and whore, the hero may err within reason, but the filmic mother must always remain chaste. Therein lies the crucial difference between our two contexts of comparison: whereas mother fetishisation in Indian cinema is the result of a symbiotic collusion between cinemagoers and filmmakers, the fetishisation of

Periathai by critics cannot be said to have been made with legitimate textual support.

To further elucidate our point, let us return to Tang's reading. Periathai, she says, has been unfairly relegated by Ravi to a "rather tragic [role] that at times dwindled to pathos and grotesquerie" (1996: 9). Our question is, what if there is no false representation here? What if Ravi's point is precisely that his grandmother is not this infallible Super Mother standing above critique but a strong woman who is nonetheless ultimately killed by her relation to the Thing to which she anchored her self. True, her amiability recalls Dad, the kynical hero in Okri's *abiku* trilogy. Both are highly spirited and fiercely independent figures who, judging by the counsel they impart to their (grand)son, 'speak the same language'. Periathai, as we highlighted earlier, calls upon Ravi to "Never let anything break [his] spirit" (*TR* 7). Similarly, Dad teaches his son Azaro to "Grow wherever life puts you down" (*TFR* 38). In terms of the legacy they leave behind, however, the two are anything but similar. As discussed previously, even if the seemingly futile political struggle to which Dad dedicates his life yields nothing concrete, that is, even if the unborn nation continues to persist in its undeadness despite his heroic exertions, his 'failure' would still be a radical success for the struggle. As the parable about the good man and the evil mosquito illustrates, this is because the future success of any revolutionary cause is always contingent upon its silent, ceaseless weaving by vanishing mediators such as Dad, i.e. rebels who

fight and, in perishing and sinking into invisibility, pave the way for others after them to advance the cause. We can assign Periathai the role of vanishing mediator and describe her (family) cause as driving “some [symbolic] stake into the country” (*TR* 140). In attempting to do so, however, we will find that not only does Periathai not ‘vanish’ (as she vows she would not prior to her demise), she also does not ‘mediate’ in the positive sense of facilitating her descendents’ endeavour to realise the goal. What she does unwittingly accomplish with her decline and demise as a first generation immigrant is set a tragic precedent which her son Naina is to end up following, and by which her grandson Ravi is to be haunted.

### **Encore!**

Like his mother before him, Naina too turns to the land for solace in the final stages of his life (*TR* 155). Uncannily, the more Naina desires the desire of his mother, that is, the more he fixates on the land, the more he resembles Periathai at the time of her death. “He has the same obsessed stare in his eyes”, Ravi observes (*TR* 159). And the closer he is to his death, the worse his luck becomes. First his son Kumar is killed in a violent road accident that crushes his body from the waist down. Then he has to cope with the trauma of knowing that Kumar’s body has to be dug up and reburied “in a proper graveyard” (*TR* 161) because he had previously stubbornly insisted on burying it next to the house, knowing full well

then that he would be breaking the law. On top of that, he faces eviction from the land he illegally occupies and on which his half-built house stands. The pressure ultimately pushes him over the edge. Driven from manic religiosity to psychotic delirium, Naina sets fire to his half-built dream house and then immolates himself (*TR* 152-3).

Like Periathai, Naina's obsession for property which compels him to give up "everything, . . . work, comfort and security" (*TR* 152-3) is not simply for or about property itself. From his traditional standpoint, the house of his dreams must be built as a family, with the family and the involvement of the eldest son. Otherwise, Naina says, "it isn't a house" (*TR* 154). The house should, in other words, positivise what the family lacks but should ideally possess: a homely sense of cohesion and togetherness. (According to Ravi, the "family was a work force, not a unit of affection, living together" (*TR* 93).) Likewise, the land on which Naina's uncompleted house stands is not just coveted for the "stability and security" that normally comes with land ownership (Tang 1993: 84). Rather, he appears to desire it for its fantasmatic properties, the 'something in the land more than the land' that promises to vindicate his life-long struggle ('make it all worthwhile') and give him the 'proof of love' which he desires from the (m)other; that is, absolute affirmation of his identity and belongingness to the ground beneath his feet. Notice also that, as with his mother, Naina's Thing is not only unattainable but also as if perversely sought and clung to *because* it is



unattainable. Of all the vacant plots of government land to (illegally) occupy, he has to select one that is not for sale (*TR* 158). This, despite having previously learned, when he tried but failed to buy the house for his mother because it too was not for sale, that illegal occupation of someone's land is more than likely to end in tears.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, it appears that what Naina actually desires is not so much the fulfilment of his desire but *desire itself*; i.e. pure desire qua *jouissance* derivable from (and which is used to attenuate) the pain one inflicts upon oneself for no other reason than to set in motion the chain of events which we have just described. That Naina might unconsciously privilege pain over pleasure is not at all implausible. As Ellie Ragland says, "People love their pain. They reify it and dignify it, sing praises to suffering, painting it in colors of a higher and purer reality" (1996: 142). Far from being confined to the boudoir of perverts, sadomasochism is a constitutive element in many cultural and religious practices. Parents sometimes beat and torture their most beloved child(ren) as if they know of no other way of expressing their love. This, according to Sarah Caldwell, is "a form of intense interaction which is at the core of the Tamil concept of family love" (1999: 344). It creates "a deep unconscious association between suffering (physical and mental) and nurturance, acceptance and love". Indeed, pain is at times quite literally the royal road to higher pleasure. Hindu ascetics have known this for centuries, hence their practice of austerities that

range from self-deprivation (e.g. fasting and abstinence from sex) to such extremes as lying on a bed of nails or holding one's arms upright in the air for decades, causing them to atrophy over time. The paramount goal is to mortify themselves into *samadhi*, the state of yogic *jouissance* (Foucault and Tompkins 1996: 80; Kakar 1981: 154-60). Periathai herself is not unfamiliar with the practice. Ravi recollects how she sometimes "forfeited her customary warm bath [and] *punished herself* with cold water" before commencing her elaborate Friday prayers (emphasis added, *TR* 5). Later in this chapter, we will see why Ravi has to reject the potentially heritable masochistic desire of "indefinite awaiting of pleasure and . . . intense expectation of pain" (Deleuze 1989: 71) if the cycle of the eternal return is to be broken.

Because Naina's all-consuming desire for the land and house is, in the psychoanalytic sense, not his but his mother's, and because his passage from struggle to grave is but a perfectly sequenced repetition of Periathai's, it stands to reason that, for all his toil, his life is ultimately neither his own nor his to autonomously direct. Unbeknownst to himself, it has always-already been prescribed for him to relive without the option of adding anything new. Strictly speaking, then, Naina's life is not so much the same as Periathai's as it is hers which he merely reenacts. And insofar as may be gleaned from Ravi's account, he reenacts it without any demonstrable understanding or consciousness of the

deeper motivations and actual implications of his singleminded obsession to sink the pillars of the house into the clay of the land (*TR* 158-9).

The central significance of Naina's death is that it officially marks the first complete cycle of the recurrence of the same precedent started by Periathai. His death also retroactively converts what began as the family matriarch's isolated misfortune into a potentially heritable family fate of "straining towards achievement that does not end in fulfilment" (Maniam 1984: 30). The logic at work here is not unlike the logic behind, say, the emergence of the 'superstitious' belief that certain roads with a high accident rate are 'dirty'.<sup>41</sup> Like Periathai's death, a single automobile accident may be attributed to any number of perfectly rational causes such as bad weather conditions and careless driving. Equivalent to Naina's death, a second road fatality at the same spot is likely to raise questions about the 'spiritual cleanliness' of the road and whether the two accidents may not be the handiwork of the 'unclean'. (Usually at this stage, stories previously 'forgotten' would suddenly be remembered; for instance, how several workers had previously died there in a series of inexplicable 'freak' accidents while constructing the road; or how the road is rumoured to have been built on top of an ancient graveyard.) Should a third accident occur at the exact same spot, not only would previous suspicions of the road's hauntedness be confirmed, the

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<sup>41</sup> The belief that certain roads are 'unclean' or 'hungry', that is, haunted by spirits who claim their victims by deliberately causing fatal accidents, is prevalent in Nigeria and Malaysia.

rational/natural causes previously attributed to the past accidents would be reattributed to the work of 'vengeful spirits'.

In the context of *TR*, the impending third accident should, for reasons to be made clear in the next section, claim *all* of Naina's offspring. The narrative, however, strongly suggests that Ravi is the only one amongst his siblings who is unfortunate enough to be conscious of and menaced by what is in his mind's eye shaping out to be a pattern of recurring family tragedy, and that he is the one keenly eyed by the dark gods to formally bring to completion the family's third cycle of the eternal return. Ravi's self-designation as 'the one' is not paranoiac at all. Consider firstly his intersubjective position within the family. He is the most educated and the most financially well-off amongst them. He is the one person his father respects "more than anyone else" (*TR* 157). Above all, he is the eldest son in a quintessentially traditional Hindu family that expects the firstborn male to "give more" (*TR* 156). For being who he is and despite his "wish to keep out of whatever mess [the family] might create" for themselves (*TR* 155), Ravi – more than his siblings – is always-already at the centre, expected to symbolically castrate himself like a worthy Hindu son before the "Great Fucker" (Father qua Law) (Lacan 1992: 307). He is expected to suppress all libidinal signs of individuality and "stifle every manifestation of his spontaneity and emotional responsiveness" so long as his father still lives (Carstairs 1999: 173). What this effectively means is that he must renounce his wish *not* to unquestioningly



comply with the ways of the family-transmitted “old culture” (Maniam, in Wilson 1993: 18).<sup>42</sup> This is the one thing he cannot do, intuitive enough as he is to know that to desire the desire of the Other is to risk repeating Periathai/Naina’s life of eternal hardship. (The question of “why you’re a nobody and how you can become a somebody” (Maniam, in Lim 1999a) we see germinating here is developed by Maniam in his subsequent novels *IFC* and *DP*.)

As a marked man, Ravi is persistently dogged by a sense of imminent doom. It is as if he intuits that the bullet bearing his name has been shot and would sooner or later hit its mark. Opaquely, he also senses that he has somehow unwittingly become a pawn in a sinister drama whose precise plot forever eludes him. We get the first intimations of this in the dark thoughts he begins to have soon after transferring to the English school: “Though I had bright dreams that night, some intolerable darkness pinched at my heart” (*TR* 25); “That night I felt, for the first time, my troubled heartbeats” (*TR* 39). The young scholar’s hauntedness becomes more pronounced as the story progresses. Consider for instance his anxiety upon discovering that his only escape route from a life of petrification in the estate is as good as sealed should he, apart from having to overcome all the other obstacles laid in his path, fail to perform well enough in a newly introduced scholastic examination to qualify for Form One: “The year

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<sup>42</sup> Naina who describes his mother as someone who “didn’t respect worm-eating customs, she changed them!” (*TR* 137) is not as ‘progressive’ and open to change as he believes he is. As proof, consider his ‘traditional’ view of land and house.

ahead stood like a rope bridge over a slimy, crocodile infested river. Could I cross over to the other bank without falling to the snouts?" (TR 89) As final and most palpable illustration, consider the scene in which Ravi casually references an obscure film he had watched:

I stayed back after school, at least once a week, to read in the library. Or I joined the seniors in the fortnightly screening of the Cinema Club. One film I can never forget is *Odd Man Out* for it stirred me strangely. (TR 80)

Because *Odd Man Out* is mentioned but once, and because neither explanation nor hint is offered as to why Ravi is "stirred" by it, the reader could easily be forgiven if he assumes that the film is Maniam's invention and that the passage, whilst piquing, is ultimately nothing to be fussed about. In assuming thus, however, the reader would miss a crucial clue to understanding Ravi's chosenness. A search in the film archives shows that *Odd Man Out* which stirred Ravi is almost certainly the 1947 film adaptation of F. L. Green's 'psychological' novel of the same name.<sup>43</sup> The antihero of the film/novel is Johnny McQueen, a mortally wounded IRA leader and the object of a massive police hunt. Making his escape through working class neighbourhoods and slums of Belfast, he encounters a series of characters – each of whom, unbeknownst to him, are animated by

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<sup>43</sup> <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0039677>

his/her own secret desire "to get something out of [him] before he dies" (jacket notes in Green 1948):

Lukey, the young artist, sees in him a chance to paint the portrait of a mortal who, in his final agony, will disclose the enigma of existence in his face. Shell, the pathetic 'down and out', hovering between the hopes of an enormous reward and the vague promise of some wonderful Belief, wants to hand him over to whoever will yield the best bargain. Father Tom, the aged priest, no longer concerned with human conceptions of right and wrong, seeks to save his soul. Tober, the embittered medical student, wants to save his body. And Agnes, the girl who loves him, knowing the hopelessness of her love and its inevitable frustration, desires that both their lives shall end before Justice can claim her man. Each character endeavours to solve the dilemma of his own life in the ruin of Johnny's. (jacket notes in Green 1948)

It would not be farfetched to suggest that Ravi is stirred by the film because he identifies with Johnny, his ideal ego and the 'odd man out' of the film. He sees himself in Johnny and recognises that they are stuck in the same proverbial boat. Both are under threat and on the run: Ravi, from the invisible hands of fate and significant figures in his life like Karupi and Ayah who each harbour some pathological wish to mould him in such a way that his potentiality would never be realised; Johnny, from the long arms of the law and the secret desires of those with whom he has the ill fortune of crossing paths. Additionally,

each step they take to avert drama seems to put them right back in the middle of it, leaving them with little choice but to participate in murky events which they sense would almost certainly lead to their perdition.

## Structural Fate

If the thought of Tamil melodrama could not but insinuate its way into our mind as we were detailing the many high tragedies that have befallen upon Ravi and his family, that would be because in certain respects *TR* is a melodrama. Like its filmic cousin, the problems it depicts are drawn from the everyday reality of many Indian poor. Thematically, they revolve around

family members' transgressions of their duties towards one another; . . . comparisons of the 'nature' of the rich and poor, the relative sophistication of each, . . . the value of their different types of education; [and] tensions arising from interaction between lower-class and upper-class characters. (Dickey 1995: 140)

Also like Tamil melodramas, *TR* is presented in acutely emotive and personal terms without directly drawing the reader's attention to the political underside of the depicted crises (Dickey 1995: 138). The reader is privy to intense private moments in Periathai and Naina's lives. He sees them mostly at their lowest, struggling to cope with one traumatic event after another (illness, mental



breakdown, death). Through all of this, however, the reader never actually sees them apprehending life from a perspective that is anywhere remotely political. Not once does the text impress upon the reader that Periathai and Naina suspect that their 'bad luck' may at least be partially shaped by the invisible sociopolitical forces. As Ravi rightly says, albeit somewhat arrogantly, "Their imagination couldn't grasp the real complexity that surrounded us" (TR 140). Similarly, Ravi's understanding of the 'complexities', while arguably more informed, is also never articulated in a way that immediately brings the political to mind. Ravi is cynically well aware of the "prescribed social rules" that prohibit him from speaking "pure" English (the language of the ruling class) and socialising with children from the high-class "yellow territory" (TR 75-6). He never, however, records his thoughts on these codes of social control in anything other than personal terms. It is *him* that fate wants to entrap, *he* is made to suffer indignities in the hands of Ayah, his family wants *him* to compromise *his* desire. As with the rest of the predominantly Indian characters in the novel, Ravi's world is so far removed from politics that momentous national events including the Japanese occupation of Malaya are referenced but casually. Independence is received as if it is merely an incidental half-curiosity:

One night, while we were still at work on the clothes, we heard Tunku Abdul Rahman, our Prime Minister, on the radio, uttering the words: *Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!*

So Independence came to us. Its immediate signs were the further reduction of the curfew hours and in the kind of goods displayed on the pavement stalls. (*TR* 131)

Given these real-life, emotive, personal and non-political elements of the melodrama in *TR*, it is not surprising that Tang, faithful to her method, should argue that the novel lacks “engagement with the larger multi-cultural society”, that it focuses too exclusively on “the ethnic theme” and therefore lacks “a sense of Malaysianness” (Tang 1993: 82-3; see also Wong 2000). Sharing her concern to an extent is Shirley Lim who writes, in less polemical terms, that “an [unknowledgeable] reader may well believe Malaysia to be, even if pluralistic, an Indian-dominated nation, or at least not a Malay-dominated country” (1984: 49). Tang and Lim do admittedly have a point. From an angle, *TR* can appear the way they describe it. Here however we have to ask: is that all there is to the novel? Have they perhaps forgotten to approach the text tangentially, that is, consider how the narrative might alert the reader to issues confronting Malaysian society “through omission rather than inclusion” (Maniam 1988: 168)? In any case, can it honestly be said that the almost ethnically homogenous cast robs *TR* of its “Malaysianness” – a highly loaded and problematic term if ever there was one.

Reading *TR* against the grain, we will find that although the novel has its moments of melodrama, it also departs from the film genre in at least one key aspect. Although Maniam draws material for the crises he depicts from the same

archive and depicts them in the same emotive and personal terms, he does not offer the reader unrealistic, fantastic resolutions that may “feed hopes that a spectacularly easier life is attainable” (Dickey 1995: 147). The manner in which the story concludes is neither happy in the escapist sense nor “achieved at the cost of repression – repression of real-life experiences, knowledge, and fears that would contradict the facility of the melodramatic solution” (1995: 137). Of course, even without the sugarcoating, *TR*’s political underside is still not entirely self-evident. However, consider what it *does* reveal: a disquieting reflection of a community stifled “within the unmoving air of a clearing: geographical, mental, cultural and spiritual” (Maniam 1984: 30). Now, in the face of this, the reader may choose to worry that a lesser reader may come away with the false impression that Malaysia is overrun by Indians. Or he might perhaps find it more worthwhile to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the community’s decay. He might ask, for instance, how this symbolic snapshot of life for migrants and their children in the early days of Malaya/Malaysia differs from the present, and what this in turn says about the nation and its postcolonial ideals.

Although, as we saw, the fate of the eternal return runs in Ravi’s family and perpetuates itself down the bloodline (as evinced by Naina’s unconscious inheritance of his mother’s Thing, and his desire to share it with the horrified Ravi), it is not just a ‘family thing’. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we know that Ravi’s family is not unlike countless other working class, lower caste,

semi-dysfunctional Tamil/Indian families in Malaya/Malaysia that have been, for generations from the colonial days of mass migration to the present, structurally crippled from birth and primed to remain at the bottom of social hierarchy. As discussed in Chapter 2, decades of being subjected to systematic exploitation has trapped the community in a vicious cycle of economic dispossession and circumscribed life opportunities. The result has been the fossilisation of a subculture of woundedness (characterised by the crippling feeling of worthlessness, apathy, self-loathing and so forth) which has, over several generations, led to the 'forgetting' of the actual underlying causes of the 'Indian dilemma' in Malaysia. Cruelly, their backwardness has even at times been perceived as the *result* of their inherent backwardness. In one of its publications, INSAN (Institute of Social Analysis, Malaysia) confirms what most Malaysians already silently know: many middle class Indian Malaysians often feel "indignant that these people [working class Indians] are always whining, begging and quarrelling, instead of taking steps to improve themselves" (INSAN 1989: 26). It is possible that some of them may feel indignant because they honestly believe that "these people" give the entire Indian community a bad name. However, is it not possible that they might secretly, without admitting it to themselves, derive obscene pleasure from the pain of the poor and the downtrodden?

In *TR*, the higher caste Ayah and Amah never seem to tire of "eroding whatever self-confidence [Ravi has] developed" and ensuring that he feels like "a



dhobi's son [who] could never dream of being more" (*TR* 95). Whenever Ravi goes over to their house to collect dirty laundry, they make him "sit on the bottom step instead of at the doorway" (*TR* 94) as if he were a beggar – which is precisely the term Amah uses to insult Ravi on one occasion (*TR* 83). Feigning benevolent concern, Ayah, rather than encourage Ravi to improve himself, urges him to be "a dutiful son and help the family" and not bring misfortune upon them with his "book ideas" (*TR* 98). Even when Ravi's family has achieved a small measure of independence after Naina sets up his own laundry business, Ayah continues to find the opportunity to enjoy Ravi's pain in person. Visiting the shop one day – royally, without alighting from his Mercedes – he unloads a batch of dirty laundry, looks briefly at Ravi, turns to Naina and says with "a vengeful gleam in his eyes": "You're still washing my clothes!" (*TR* 133) Deferentially, Naina replies in Tamil that "Each man makes his way in life as best as he can" (*TR* 133). Ravi, surprisingly, keeps his silence, although one suspects he would have liked to break out into song:

When we say:  
'We have no homes,  
                no land,  
no fields,  
                and no crops,  
There is no salvation.'

They say:

'You have strong hands,  
Use them for begging bowls  
There are plenty of towns  
Can we help you in any other way?  
Be off with you.'

They make us beggars

When we tell them about the weeds,  
They teach us how to kill the crop.

...

They push a man to his death.

When we ask them how to start something,  
they tell us to end everything.

...

When we say:

'Tamils have no education,

no energy,

no support,

and no guts

No one helps them.'

They say:

'You have bellies

fill them up.

You have dreams,

it's time to sleep.

There's nothing to worry about.

Just eat and sleep.'

. . .

When you ask how to improve yourself,  
they will tell you the riddles of the universe.

When we say:

'Tamils have no greatness,  
no unity  
and no possibility  
of changing any of this.'

They say:

'There are platforms,  
and speeches  
and great leaders.  
Here is a garland,  
and here is my neck;  
what other unity do you need?'

They will lead us on their own.

If you try to protect yourself,  
they will cut off your head. (in Haridas and Dhandayudham 1981:  
20-23)

The English translation of the above 'tune', a Tamil poem by I. Ulaganathan, nicely captures our point on the working class Indian community in Malaysia. Not only have they been thrown into a world not of their own choosing, their well-off cousins who are in a position to help actually 'conspire' to

perpetuate and enjoy their oppression. Additionally, as the persona laments, political leaders who are supposed to uplift the community have proven useless. From the persona's description of the oratorical effusions and preoccupation with symbolic brown-nosing, one would be forgiven to think that he is indirectly referring to, amongst others, the leaders and stalwarts of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). MIC is the main all-Indian component party in Barisan Nasional (Malaysia's ruling coalition) that has been entrusted with the future of Indian Malaysians. However, largely because of its infamous politics of self-adulation, petty squabbles and personal enrichment, the Indian community has been languishing, as it has been since the nation's founding more than four decades ago (Khoo 1993: 279; Elegant 2000).<sup>44</sup> Because the condition of working class Tamils has fundamentally remained unchanged throughout its history in Malaya/Malaysia, it stands to reason that, in retrospect, each and every generation of working class Tamils in the country has always-already been structurally fated, primed to relive their immigrant forefathers' circumscribed life. It is for this reason that all of Naina's offspring are, as we signalled earlier, ripe for fate's picking.

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<sup>44</sup> Indian Malaysian rubber plantation workers have historically been one of the most exploited groups in the country. Even today, some are still treated as bonded labourers and paid with coupons instead of a proper salary.



## Being Responsible

Family dynamics and structural categories like class and race delimit our existence in more ways and more profoundly than we often consciously realise. Yet, as is often forgotten, they are *not* all-determining. If they were, Ravi should not by right have managed to postpone his meeting with fate in a way that eluded Kumar. (Kumar was Ravi's prematurely aged brother and the archetypal filial Hindu son in the novel. Lorry attendant by day and petrol pump attendant by night, he died before his potential was realised.<sup>45</sup>) Neither should Ravi have succeeded in acquiring the 'forbidden' white-collar skill that would at the minimum guarantee him "a comfortable, unthreatened" life of economic security (*TR* 140).

Contrary to critics' portrayal of Ravi as someone who passively submits to the chain of causes that determine his conduct, Ravi – as we shall see – is the only one who comes closest to recognising the three key lessons in *TR*: first, that one's "relation with tradition should not be one of submission and repetition, but of transformation and critique" (Laclau 1990: 179); second, that meaningful belongingness is not contingent upon the coming into possession of one's

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<sup>45</sup> From a young age, Kumar has been the obedient son in the family. Without complaint, he shoulders most of the laundry delivery duties after Ravi, having been abused once too often by Ayah, refuses to go on his rounds (*TR* 107). Kumar comes to the rescue again by volunteering to look after a new laundry shop in Gurun when, despite Naina's coercion, Ravi refuses to shoulder the duty (144). Also, although Ravi's reluctant financial contribution to the family is greater Kumar's and Samy's (his other brother) combined, it is Kumar who willingly gives his mother his entire salary from the petrol kiosk (154).

impossible Thing; and third, that one's potentiality is ultimately determined by one's active actualisation of it, not by one's structural fate or the transcendental beyond. Of course, this is far from saying that Ravi is perfect. He is in fact as deeply flawed and as incapable of real happiness as the rest of Maniam's trademark tragic protagonists like Krishnan ('Arriving'), Muniandy ('The Cord') and Rajan (*IFC*). Nevertheless, there is, one has to admit, something to be admired about his taking upon himself the task of critically examining himself "being aware of [himself] being aware of the world" (Solomon 1983: 313). This will to know rather than cripple himself (more than he already has been by his structural positioning) by adopting his family's insular worldview is curiously not always given its due weight by critics. As we previously mentioned, it is usually either passed over in silence or, if brought up, invariably inverted into evidence of his immaturity. Things become all the more curious if we take into account how integral the notion of agency is in *TR* and indeed almost all of Maniam's works. In the preface to his collection of short stories *Haunting the Tiger: Contemporary Stories from Malaysia*, Maniam writes:

What is that passionate concern or commitment that has been the fuel . . . ? It has to do with breaking out, with pushing the frontiers of consciousness further away from the purely social, political and cultural centre . . . The writing tries to unearth the hidden resources of the man or woman beleaguered by unacceptable social, political and cultural visions and practices. (1996: x)

At its heart, Maniam's philosophical approach to life and literature is not unlike Okri's which we discussed in Part II. Just as the latter postulates the overcoming of consciousness' humiliation as foundational to the unearthing of one's infinite wealth, Maniam sees "the transformation of leaden consciousness into the knowledge that [surpasses] understanding" (1997: 21) as the pivotal precondition "for developing a fuller attitude towards life and the appreciation of man's many-fold talents" (1987: 219). In Maniam, as in Okri, this requires more than pointing the accusing finger at others ('*you* did this to me', '*they* corrupted us'). Infinitely less pleasurable, it calls for the recognition of and owning up to one's blameworthiness, one's complicity in the creation and perpetuation of the very dilemma one faces. In Lacanian terms, it necessitates the traversal of fantasy, a full recognition of who I always-already was, namely the effect of causal determination who makes the relation between the cause and its effect possible (Zupančič 2000: 29).

Before we proceed to elucidate how Ravi might or might not be said to traverse his fantasy by *TR*'s conclusion, it would be useful if we first recall a few key concepts which we have covered previously but will encounter again later. For better contrast, let us proceed via Maniam's 'Booked for Life' (*BFL*), a short story which is thematically more intimate with *TR* than first meets the eye. *BFL* revolves around the life of Mary Lim, a college lecturer and "a hard, hard woman" (*BFL* 23). In her world, men are corrupters of women, the "neighbours in

their dark skins” are disgusting (*BFL* 45), and her maturing teenage son is fast turning into a version of his father, the allegedly conniving Indian lecher who is her ex-husband. Mary is simply unable to recognise that her world is ‘bitter and twisted’ because she herself has framed it that way. In her eyes, the wicked ways of the world exist independently of her participation and there can be no changing her mind about that. As she chastises herself when self-certainty falters, “Don’t tell me I don’t understand my own mind. Don’t tell me I keep secrets from myself” (*BFL* 50).

What Mary misrecognises is not of course the self of her symbolic identification but the fundamental fantasy that supports her universe of self-experience – the way things actually, objectively seem to her even if they don’t seem that way to her, to paraphrase Žižek (2000d: 83). A person may have several core fantasies, “some of which are conscious or preconscious”, but in Lacanian discourse, there is “one single fantasy – an unconscious fantasy for most of us – that is absolutely fundamental” (Fink 1997: 56-7). This absolutely fundamental fantasy which Žižek terms as “the primordial form of *narrative*” (original emphasis 1997: 10) is the very frame through which the subject gains access to reality. It colours his entire existence, influences his orientation in life, the way he relates to other people including parents and lovers, and his capacity for sexual satisfaction. Like the Gordian knot, fundamental fantasy literally holds together the ontological consistency of the subject’s self-experience. Cut the knot and his



world would fall apart. (Recall, for example, how Periathai's world disintegrates when she loses her house.) Mary's fantasy is constructed around the empty space occupied by the fantasmatic figure of her former husband, Suresh. Initially eroticised as Siddharta "the handsome, incorruptible prince of men" (*BFL* 34), Suresh quickly loses his godly radiance after the birth of their socially stigmatised Chindian<sup>46</sup> son, Michael. Gradually he unfolds into a gift of shit, an object desublimated of the dignity of the Thing:

'He was a sneaky one, that Suresh,' . . .

'You can't make the leopard change its spot for something else. He only pretended to play the domesticated father. I hear he's still going from woman to woman, leaving his trademark behind. Wouldn't he have left something behind in Michael? Not just the genetics. Something only his crafty mind can scheme up?' (*BFL* 43-4)

Daily obsessed with Suresh's real and/or imagined evil deeds and the countless ways her life continues to be poisoned by them, Mary avoids confronting her fear and suspicion that there is, and has always been, something 'dirty' inside of her "waiting to be stroked into motion" (*BFL* 33). What she does not realise is that any content that is repressed always returns as symptoms. In Lacan's words, "what is foreclosed in the symbolic reappears in the real" (1992:

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<sup>46</sup> 'Chindian' refers to a person of mixed Chinese-Indian parentage.

131). In Mary's case, they reappear as irrational guilt, persecution complex, obsessive compulsion for cleanliness and order, and incestuous dreams about Michael, her teenage son. As her supreme symptom, imaginary poison trickles daily from her withered nipples, a foul-smelling excrescence she takes perverse pleasure in cleansing and reviling as "the ugliness and filth women inherit from men" (*BFL* 62). Every day it reminds her of the possibility that she might be a Putana at heart. (In Hindu mythology, Putana is the demoness who tried to kill the infant god Krishna with her poisoned breasts/milk. The name is invoked here to symbolize the source of contaminated love, the kind that kills even as it nurtures.<sup>47</sup>)

Mary's tragedy is that although her fantasy surrounding that "bastard" (*BFL* 40) Suresh happily distracts her from her fear-suspicion of being 'unclean', it also "creates what it purports to conceal, its 'repressed' point of reference" (Žižek 1999a: 92). In other words, hidden by her paranoid construction is the fact that there is nothing to hide in the first place. Mary is and never was the inherently besmirched and outwardly corrupting horror her fantasy purports to conceal. From the omniscient narrator, we know that her neurosis is a reactive-formation to her 'anal' parents having soundly inculcated in her such lessons as the importance of keeping her Chinese blood undiluted and her culture pure (*BFL*

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<sup>47</sup> See Sudhir Kakar's *The Inner World* (1981: Chapter 5) for discussion on the Putana myth.

41), the impropriety of giving expression to emotions, and the good etiquette of bearing pain “stoically, even heroically” (*BFL* 40).

The key question that concerns *BFL* as much as *TR* is this: if the imaginary excrescence ‘in Mary that is more than Mary’ exists only insofar as its existence is presupposed by Mary, and if her presupposition of its existence is the founding gesture upon which her entire bitter life is built, whose fault is it? Is Mary accountable for the idiosyncratic way in which she relates to the world, or should the blame be absorbed by the Other (her parents, husband, son and so on)? Ethically speaking, are *we* answerable for our fundamental fantasy, our unconscious “choice of neurosis” (Zupančič 2000: 35)? For instance, if I were a Caucasian male whose over-fascination with Asian women compels me to obsessively pursue the objects of my desire to the detriment of my well-being (and the well-being of the objects I pursue), would I be answerable for my passion – or rather my erection, “one of the last remainders of authentic spontaneity, something that cannot be thoroughly mastered through rational-instrumental procedures” (Žižek 1999f: 385)? Am I the master of my fetish, or am I – horror of horrors – *it*, this point of pure desire palpitating beyond the pleasure principle? Analogously, if the leader of a political party is compelled by the ‘voice of God’ (the categorical imperative of his conscience) to impose some grotesque form of religious law upon the multireligious population of the country to which he belongs, and if this leads to the oppression, if not extirpation, of the ‘infidel’ half

of the population, should he be held responsible for his action if he argues in self-defence that although he 'feels' for the victims, there is nothing he can do about it since he is only a humble agent-instrument of Divine Necessity? Apropos of *TR*: are Periathai and Naina accountable for the installation of the Hindu-Indian Thing at the centre of their world? Are they responsible for the good and bad, and the pain and pleasure they derive from being faithful-unto-death to It? Are they autonomous individuals who volitionally chose their own Absolute and therefore their destiny, or are they just 'simple folks' who know not what they do?

In Lacan, the subject is *always fully responsible* for the maxim that guides his action: "the determination of the subject by the other is always the subject's self-determination" (Žižek 1993: 126). The subject is the effect of causal determination. But he is also the 'stumbling block' in the relation between cause and its effect, that is, the active mediator who makes the causal relation possible. As Zupančič explains: "it may well be that you were dragged along by the torrent of (natural) necessity, but in the final analysis it was you who made this cause the cause. There is no cause of the cause of your action; the cause of the cause can only be the subject itself" (2000: 34). For that reason,

any immediate reference to my nature ('What can I do, I was made like this!') is false; my relationship to the impulses in me is always a mediated one, i.e. my impulses determine me only insofar as I



recognise them, which is why I am fully responsible for them.  
(Žižek 1993: 126)

If the self for which I am fully responsible is not found-given but self-positing, and if this self-positing self is the obstacle standing in the way of my self-overcoming, then what steps can I take to overcome myself? The answer in Lacan is of course *la traversée du fantasme*, the authentic act of traversing the fantasy wherein I (the subject qua analysand) come to identify with the real of my desire, recognise myself in my own unacknowledged motivations, in the censured chapters of my self-expression (Žižek 1994: 25). This, according to Žižek, is how we should read Freud's formulation, *wo es war, soll ich werden*: "you, the subject, must identify with the place where your symptom already was; in its 'pathological' particularity you must recognize the element which gives consistency to your being" (1989: 75). By journeying in its entirety the path of the determination of his actions, the subject will arrive at the 'true knowledge' of his symptom, simultaneously dissolving it, thereby reconciling himself with himself. The "act of knowing is in itself an act of liberation from unconscious coercion" (1994: 25).

Traversing the fantasy necessarily leads to the total annihilation of the self and its recreation *ex nihilo*. In Maniam's words, it results in the "death of a very restricting self" (Greet 1991: 8) and its replacement "by a paradigmatic self that is

capable of encompassing more" (Tan 1998: 109). In Chapter 3, we saw this exemplified by the flamenco dancer who leaps into the terrifying unknown and returns transformed, shining with a "new fiery stature" (Okri 1996a: 10). In the *abiku* trilogy, Dad undergoes not one but multiple cycles of symbolic death and rebirth. With each cycle, he becomes stronger and more powerful. Even from these few illustrations, it is clear that the cure of 'going through' the fantasy is beneficial. It is also clear that we should, if we love ourselves, desire it for ourselves. In psychoanalysis, however, the fundamental maxim is that we never really desire it. This, even when we claim and insist that we really do want to change. The basic position of the subject of desire "is one of a refusal of knowledge, a will not to know . . . the why and wherefore of his . . . symptom" (Fink 1997: 7). He would rather cling to his *jouissance* (his pleasure-in-pain, the precious self-defining memories he has woven around his symptom) than 'let go' of himself and risk ending up "in an entirely new landscape, a featureless territory in which [his] existence will no longer be confirmed by what [he] feels" (Zupančič 2000: 9). The fear of self-erasure is not unjustified. However, it is often forgotten that although the fear is real, it is also ultimately groundless "since it belongs to the very subject who will no longer be around . . . to experience this 'loss' as a loss".

In *BFL*, the moment of 'the loss of the loss' never arrives. Mary moves no closer to renouncing the obscene enjoyment she derives from being bitter and

blaming the world for it. To compound to that, she even lures a concerned male friend, Mr. Tan, to her house and then proceed to goad and coerce him to put his lips to her nipples and suck the poison out of her. Hesitatingly and partially driven by the desire 'give it to her' so that she might become less frigid, Mr. Tan complies – not realising that in doing so he unwittingly becomes instrumental in converting Mary's unfounded fear of being a Putana into reality. Similarly, in *TR*, Periathai and Naina never 'got over' themselves. They die clinging to the fantasy that the Other (life, fate, the town council, etc.) has stolen their 'treasure', the house (qua Hindu-Indian Thing) of their desire. Till the bitter end, they refuse to own up to the fact that *their Thing has the authority to confer upon them the completion they desire only insofar as they themselves authorise it*. By their own volition, they made this cause their cause, "not as something subordinate to them but as their absolute Cause" (Žižek 1994: 39). For that reason, the argument that 'they have no choice' (except to cling to their house-Thing) or that 'they know not what they do' (because they are simple and uneducated) can only be taken as false. In the final analysis, they authorised their own incompleteness.

## **The Beautiful Soul**

It is clear that the kind of transformation which Maniam's works seek is not simply a matter of changing one's opinion on particular issues or deciding

whether to adopt or not adopt this or that destiny. Neither does it call for the hacking away of one's cultural roots or the replacement of one set of religious ideals with another. What is demanded of the subject rather is a radical shift in the way he relates to his Thing. Put another way, we might say that it demands that the subject journeys from sense-certainty (consciousness which takes what it sees as obvious) through perception (critical consciousness of oneself being aware of oneself being aware of the world) to absolute knowledge (identification with the repressed pathological particularity that gives consistency to one's being).

In *TR*, the only character who rises to this challenge and whose life trajectory closely parallels the movement of consciousness we have just mapped is none other than Ravi. In the early days of sense-certainty, life was idyllically unproblematic. He remembers its romantic earthiness, the wonder of his first Deepavali (the Hindu festival of light), the communal cooking and feasting, and the cultural taboos and old wives' tales that enchanted his imaginary world. He remembers the "echoed voices among the hills" which the children occasionally heard and took as "the chanting and tinkling of banana-tree spirits dancing in the courtyard at night". As well, he remembers the realness of fair Hindu gods and goddesses who fought evil "in battles that clashed over our sleeping heads" (*TR* 14). "There was a lot of colour in our invisible world," Ravi writes. It was "a special country . . . more tangible than the concrete one we flitted through every day" (*TR* 13-4). Ravi's sense-certainty dissipates into thin air the day he is



plucked from the Tamil school and placed in the English school (by Naina, at the crazy behest of Karupi who claims that a formally-attired axe-wielding white man had appeared to her in a dream and ordered Ravi's transfer). "The world I had known fell apart", Ravi dramatically puts it (*TR* 20). In place of the comforting familiarity of his hitherto cocooned existence, he now faces the radical alterity of the English school which simultaneously impresses and intimidates with its colonial architecture and clinical atmosphere. In place of the specially imported Tamil textbooks, he is issued glossy English schoolbooks whose dazzling and colourful pages are capable of transporting him "into a pleasant, unreachable [Eng]land" (*TR* 24). And in place of Murugesu, his quirky former teacher from India, he has Miss Nancy, an expatriate English teacher whose obsession with cleanliness, order and discipline is as pathological as Mary Lim's in *BFL*. For Ravi, Miss Nancy is, despite her unconcealed (albeit humorously caricaturised) racism towards her pupils, an endless source of wonder. The repertoire of 'English' children's stories she regularly tells in class, particularly the (Enid Blyton-like) tales of a blue-eyed, tawny-haired boy named Ernie and his flower-munching horse called Dobbin, cannot but give wings to his imagination. As well, Ravi is strangely pleased by the often-terrifying lessons in western-style personal hygiene Miss Nancy imparts with the keenness of a demented prison warden. They inspire him to draw comparisons between the colonial education he now receives and life as it was under Murugesu's tutelage. In one instance, he

reappraises the Hindu initiation ceremony Murugesu had guided him through and arrives at the following conclusion:

Though the central figure in the ceremony, I had felt I was the least important person in the gathering. I could have been an age-old pebble, confirmed in its existence only because they had discovered it . . . There was no unexpectedness. I was expected and accepted. [In contrast,] Miss Nancy made me feel I was a discovery in myself. (*TR* 30)

Young Ravi's fateful entry into the new world of the English school clearly coincides with his awakening to the fact that there is more of the world to be discovered than he had previously realised. At this point, he could have, had he wanted to, run away from the question of why the colonial other is so fascinating and if it is truly as inherently fascinatingly other as it appears. Instead he engages with it, tries to fathom its enigma and, in the process of doing so, expands the boundaries of his self-understanding. These actions hardly qualify Ravi as the out-and-out Sloterdijkian 'sucker' imagined by critics who treat his infidelity to his roots as inexorable evidence of his seizure-neutralisation by colonial ideology. By the same token, however, neither would it be accurate to say that he does not in time 'lose himself' in his fascination with otherness. One might for example point to his over-enthusiasm in soaking up an 'alien' set of sociosymbolic rules which directly or otherwise inspires him to challenge the sanctity of the rules which govern-oppress his community. One might even be justified in arguing that Ravi

is, at this point, as guilty as the “white monkeys” in *TR* (43), that is, his schoolmates’ Anglomaniacal fathers who, complete in their “*Bose caps*”, swagger aggressively in public, expect their children to speak English, and mock Naina for clinging “to the Tamil tongue and Indian religious practices so tenaciously” (*TR* 18). The question is: what if all the drama is necessary? What if Ravi has to ‘lose himself’ (misrecognise his unfreedom) and ‘go through hell’ (traverse his fantasy) before he can ‘return to himself’ (attain true freedom in the act of recognising himself as the cause of the cause of his actions)?

Here we should bear in mind that one does not and cannot leap directly from sense-certainty to absolute (self-)knowledge without first working through the contradictions in one’s self-conception. In the same way, Ravi cannot choose himself as a free subject without first recognising his unfreedom, i.e. the fact that he has, despite his cocksureness in the independence of his will to self-determination, always-already been determined, ‘carried along’ by what we may term his ‘English-Thing’. The crucial twist here is that he must recognise himself not simply as the inert causal effect of his relation to his Thing but the effect of a cause which, although he did not consciously posit as his Absolute (just as a fetishist does not rationally choose his fetish), is nevertheless his/himself. In other words, he must attribute to himself the unconscious decision involved in the incorporation of the English-Thing as the law of his heart. He must then be able to say to himself, ‘I now know that I do not have to subordinate myself to the Thing

of my desire just so that I may feel “worthy of love” or that I have “the right of existence” (Fuery 2000: 28). The reason is because ultimately *I am my Thing*. It is *I* who has the authority to confer upon myself the belongingness I seek.’ It is only when Ravi reaches this point that he may attain true freedom, or in Maniam’s words, come “into the knowledge that [surpasses] understanding” (1997: 21). This, as we shall see later in our discussion, applies as much on level of the personal as it does on the political.

To flesh out the ‘logic of freedom’ we have just described, let us continue tracing the movement of Ravi’s consciousness towards its supercession. Earlier, we saw how his transfer to the English school simultaneously cures him of his naivety and plunges him into a world of uncertainty. We have also seen how he quickly gains some sense of equilibrium and starts to take pleasure in forming new knowledge about his world. Now, out of this, a new self-consciousness emerges – one that is increasingly precious about itself and over-confident that it is “something that *exists on its own account*” (original emphasis, Hegel 1977: 481). As Ravi himself says, “One’s world was, after all, private and it was only through chance encounters, as had been Miss Nancy and mine, that one discovered the logic and the power that sustains the individual” (*TR* 140). Consider, as further illustration of his newfound preciousness, the following scene. One day after listening to Miss Nancy’s story about a dominatrix-like Snow White giving her servile dwarfs a severe tongue-lashing for messing up her



house, Ravi returns home with a “craving for order” (*TR* 37). To satisfy this strange craving,

I appropriated a corner of the front room – the trestle bed had been knocked down – for myself. I marked off a cubicle with chalk. No one could step into that imaginary room. I kept all my school things and I often read or wrote there . . . Once I stepped over the fictitious line I couldn’t be disturbed. An imperturbable insulation cut off the happenings in the other parts of the house. Sometimes my mother came rushing in, grabbed me by the shoulders and beat me [for not watching over my brother].

. . .

Gradually, however, the family respected my self-imposed isolation. It was the brightest corner in the room and soon attracted admirers.

“Don’t disturb him! He’s reading,” my mother said if any child crawled close to the lines.

I rigorously drew these demarcations, not for myself but for them. My mother didn’t even dare sweep that corner – I did it myself with a salvaged wooden-handled broom. (*TR* 38)

Ravi’s staking out of his own personal space amidst the household chaos is an obvious attempt at asserting his individuality, not to mention a pragmatic

move at ensuring that he has a quiet place to go when he needs to study or escape momentarily from the family bustle. Additionally – and this is the crucial part – the act mirrors the folding back of Ravi’s consciousness into itself, as if “in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being” (Hegel 1977: 400). Like the Hegelian figure of Beautiful Soul who “flees from contact with the actual world” in order to “preserve the purity of its heart” (1977: 400), Ravi turns “away from the God who ruled [his] people” (*TR* 79). He refuses to participate in the dirty games regulated by unwritten sociosymbolic rules that empower people like Ayah to keep them in subjection. As well, he withdraws from his family which he regards with a degree of condescension and a not-unjustified fear of being pulled down by them and turned into another victim of the eternal return:

Only my studies mattered. I was at them constantly, aware that I could go to England if I won a teaching bursary. Naina’s interests and my family’s struggles became unimportant. The dignity of the individual was the only thing that engaged me. And this couldn’t be acquired if I gave in to quirkish desires and irrational dreams. My father had surrendered to some secret grief at Periathai’s death and borrowed indiscriminately to salve a non-existent pride.

...

It was amusing to watch the family repair its broken image. (*TR* 141)

Ravi's strategy of staying out of the family's "mess" (*TR* 155) is hard-hearted, to say the least. But lest we forget, it is a strategy that in the end yields him what was denied his father and grandmother: a comfortable, unthreatened life of economic security. This is by no means an empty victory, even if it comes at the high price of estrangement from his family, as it proves that the curse of the eternal return (the material, 'creature comfort' half of it, at this point) *is* ejectable into the past. There is of course the 'existential' half of the curse to be taken care of. For despite the solace Ravi derives from his English-Thing, the desiderated sense of belonging continues to elude him, just as it always eluded his father and grandmother. He remains unreconciled within, abstracted from the world, pining away for "the snow-capped isolation and the gentleness of the buttercupped meadows" of Ernie and Dobbin (*TR* 39). Ravi's two-year sojourn in England appears to have somewhat attenuated his fascination with his Thing. "The snow wasn't as white as I had imagined it to be", Ravi writes (*TR* 147). Similarly, Ernie who had hitherto been his secret ego-ideal turns out to be not so unique, appearing as he does "among the many faces [he had seen] in that midland town or in London". It is not until his father's suicide, however, that a radical break occurs. Naina and Periathai are no more, he writes, but they are still vivid in his mind (*TR* 172). On that note, he closes with a poem containing "an immature and tormenting recognition" which he had written with "difficulty and uncertainty":

'Full Circle'  
(for Naina)

Have you been lost  
for words?  
Have you been lost  
for words when  
you had them stacked  
like images in a dream?

Have you been lost for words  
when they imprisoned  
your flesh, your thoughts,  
feelings that rose with the wind?

Have you been lost?

Then words will not serve.  
They will be like the culture  
you refused at adolescent,  
drinking from the tap  
instead of the well.

The dregs at the bottom  
of well water is the ash  
of family prayers you rejected  
The clay taste  
the deep-rootedness  
you turned aside from –



for the cleanliness of chlorine.

Words will not serve.

You'll be twisted by them

into nameless little impulses

that roam dark city roads, raging.

They will be vague knots

of feelings, lustreless, cultureless,

buried in a heart that will not serve. (TR 173)

### **Full Circle: The Spirit Returns to Itself**

Although it is clear to everyone that 'Full Circle' marks *the* turning point in Ravi's life, there is surprisingly little agreement on the direction his life is supposed to turn or even what it is exactly that he is supposed to recognise. Tang argues that the poem speaks of the price of alienation Ravi has to pay for steering clear of the "struggle to achieve identity that had so tormented his grandmother and his father" (1996: 7). Shirley Lim, on the other hand, emphasises Ravi's acknowledgment of the poignant fact that it takes his father's death to "resacralize" his "empty and passionless" middle class world and return him to the spiritual values of his people, as arguably attested to by his participation in Naina's traditional burial ceremony (1984: 43). Lynette Tan, on her part, ties the poem to Ravi's recognition of "his former self as victim to an excess of individualistic materialism" (1998: 124).

'Full Circle' is open-ended enough to contain many interpretations at once, including the three summarised above. But it does not in itself contain the answer to Ravi's recognition. The answer is in fact always-already decided in advance, concealed-implicit in the sense one makes of the central characters' respective struggles. That is, if the reader decides from the outset that Periathai and Naina remain unerring throughout the novel and that Ravi is wrong to believe that they should not have clung so tenaciously to their Hindu-Indian Thing, then the logical conclusion would have to be that Ravi's "tormenting recognition" is a recognition of the errors of his ways, one that must necessarily return him to the roots he had previously rejected. That would effectively make *TR* a novel about the importance of being a self-enclosed monad. The problem with this position is that it runs directly counter to the textual evidence we have examined, not to mention the spirit of Maniam's politics. Suffice it to recall as we emphasised earlier that the practical challenge in Maniam lies in self-supercession, in "breaking out" and "pushing the frontiers of consciousness" (Maniam 1996: x) – *not* in recoiling into oneself like *Beautiful Soul*. In Hegelian terms, it requires the subject to undergo a series of progressive movements in consciousness; precisely, from sense-certainty through perception to absolute knowledge.

If a nativist return to the roots is out of the question, then what other plausible options could there be? Our contention is that Naina's death over his Thing is the trigger that makes Ravi realise for the first time that he too had erred

and been as guilty as his family whose dirty laundry he had hitherto aired with little restraint. As with his Periathai and Naina, Ravi had submitted to the amazing Thing of his desire, taken its Law as inviolable and acted as if only his Thing and no one else's had "the logic and the power" to sustain the individual (*TR* 140). He had believed himself free when he was in actual fact under its hypnotic spell, transfixed and "lost for words" (173) in powerless over-fascination with it. In allowing his consciousness to be thus humbled, he had, like them, ipso facto committed what Giorgio Agamben would term the ethically "evil" act of living "in a deficit of existence" (1993: Ethics). That is to say, Ravi had deprived himself of a fuller existence and the opportunity to "discover wider and more inclusive centres for the understanding and assimilation of larger areas of life" (Maniam 1994a: 10).

Unlike Naina and Periathai, however, Ravi is luckier. If the poem bears witness to his *past* errors, then it would not be unjustified to argue that he has also, apart from having clawed his way out of poverty, come 'full circle', 'returned to himself' in consciousness – not as the same person previously lost in alienation but as he who now recognises himself as 'his own work', as the one who precedes his Cause. Hence, he is no longer enthralled by and hostage to his mythic Thing. Neither does he seem inclined to enchain himself to other people's Thing, for instance, by practising again the rites and rituals he had "refused at adolescent". After all, culture, like words, is 'not-all' (*pas-tout* as Lacan would

say): "Then words will not serve. / They will be like the culture / you refused". Culture is not the truth of one's being but the effect of its absence, a systematic notation of all past failed attempts to capture one's essence which lies beyond the wall of language. For this very reason, culture should not be blindly clung to – or worse, transmitted unchanged in content and form to future generations so that one's present existence might obtain (false) meaning.

*TR* terminates at the point when Ravi, having overcome himself and found humility and self-knowledge (the long and hard way, like all of Maniam's anti-heroes), might be conceived as being free finally to not live like a sensitive plant that withdraws into itself when touched. We know from the various examples we have seen that the change can only be a positive good for Ravi. This, even if his gain is neither 'earth-shattering' (to anyone but himself) nor 'magical' (in the way that symbolic rebirths are in Okri's trilogy, as illustrated for instance by Dad's 'miraculous' awakening to new powers on the seventh day of unconsciousness). Against this background, how then do we explain the sombre note on which *TR* concludes and which some critics have taken as the cipher of Ravi's final defeat as well as the just payment for having betrayed his culture? The real answer, one suspects, is simpler and closer to the joyless fact that his father had just died in a violent suicide and that he would need time to mourn before getting on with life again. Not so easy to answer in a sentence, however, are the pressing questions which *TR* leaves us with and which are picked up again in *IFC*, Maniam's second



novel which he has described as a “take-off” on *TR* (Tan 1998: 249). How, for instance, might Ravi or someone like him who has returned to himself thenceforth proceed? What practical application might the logic of freedom (traced by the circular movement of Ravi’s self-consciousness) have in the context of Malaysian politics and competing nationhood ideals? These are but two key questions we will be addressing in Chapter 7.

## *IN A FAR COUNTRY*

### **The Politics of Reading**

Maniam's second novel, *In a Far Country* (*IFC*), is widely acknowledged as a difficult piece of writing to penetrate. Wong Soak Koon, for instance, describes it as dense and obscure (Wong 2000), while C.W. Watson is of the opinion that it is "over-ambitious" for using "too many different styles and forms, too many literary devices" (Watson 1993a: 197, 204). Furthermore, Watson says, key moments in the novel tend to be ambiguous and disassociated from each other: "there is no overall coherence, either in terms of a consistent style or in terms of an overarching narrative structure" (1993a: 202).

*IFC* is not perfect but flaws imputed to it are not always internal to the work. The fault sometimes lies with those critics who seem reluctant to engage with the text on its own terms. For instance, where *TR* is criticised by Tang Soon Ping for being predictably fixated on the Indian theme (1993: 83), *IFC* is ironically regretted by Charles Sarvan for not engaging "more fully with the

Indians in Malaysia, their history and situation" (1996: 67). In addition, as will be elaborated, critics tend to adhere too closely to Maniam's interpretation of *IFC* instead of focussing on the text's rich symbolic potential. Most disturbing of all, they tend to attribute to *IFC* political issues and questions it does not raise – issues and questions which furthermore reflect a dangerously simplistic understanding of racial politics in Malaysia.

An exemplary case is the standard treatment of Rajan, *IFC*'s protagonist and anti-hero who has "lost that anchorage in . . . life and only vaguely sense[s] where [he has] to turn to for a more meaningful centre" (*IFC* 121). Nowhere in the narrative is it suggested or implied that Rajan is not a Malaysian-born Indian Malaysian and a member of a historically dispossessed ethnic minority. Yet he is repeatedly described and treated by Wong Ming Yook as a migrant who views the world "through the lens of an essentially migrant consciousness" (2000). Similarly, Malaysian ethnic minorities are misrepresented as members of "migrant communities", many of whom, Wong states without irony, "have never resolved the problem their migrant fathers/mothers encountered earlier in the [twentieth] century: estrangement and alienation from the adopted new land". Not only that, "most of the current [Malaysian] writers in English" are wrongly framed as writing from "immigrant perspectives".<sup>48</sup> It is strange to say the least

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<sup>48</sup> Wong uses the terms 'migrant' and 'immigrant' interchangeably in her essay 'Traversing Boundaries: Journeys into Malaysian Fiction in English' (2000).

that Wong, who is herself a Chinese Malaysian, should persistently refer to the individuals and groups concerned as (im)migrants when it is crystal clear that

[they] are not *pendatangs* [Malay for '(im)migrants', a derogatory term "Only politicians campaigning for votes used"]. Their great-grandfathers were *pendatangs*. Some of their grandfathers were *pendatangs*. Their fathers were not *pendatangs*. They're not *pendatangs*. (Krishnan, the protagonist in Maniam's short story 'Arriving', Maniam 1995: 7)

It bears pointing out that what we have here is not inconsequential hairsplitting over terminology. If *IFC* rejects "externally imposed views of group or collective identity", as Wong herself concedes, and if it seeks avenues of coming into meaningful belongingness to oneself and one's homeland in terms more embracing than 'race', then would the critic not be undermining the novel (not to mention the efforts of those seeking to repoliticise sedimented racial identities in Malaysia) if he/she allows him/herself to be seduced into accepting the framework of the social relationship of domination? That is to say, by referring to non-Malay Malaysians as migrants when they are not migrants, is the critic not by implication affirming the racist logic that non-Malay Malaysians have no right to claim equal rights as Malays in the country of their birth (*not* adoption, as Wong says) because their forefathers were migrants and because they themselves, as descendents of 'outsiders', can never have the same 'blood connection' to the land as Malays? In short, is the ideological battle not won when



“the adversary himself *begins to speak our language*, without being aware of it” (Žižek 1991b: 65)?

Paul Sharrad, in his introduction to the Skoob edition of *IFC*, also makes the same error of describing Rajan as “a second generation, upwardly mobile *migrant*” (emphasis added 1993: xiv). However, his use of the term seems more like an unfortunate slip than an attempt at adding undue pathos to the notion of ‘displacement’, albeit a slip that does not render his analysis of the text any less problematic. Sharrad posits as his central thesis that *IFC* expresses the “paradox of being and becoming” (1993: ix). That, he says, is exemplified by Maniam who, although a Malaysian, is compelled to write a novel “about trying to become a Malaysian”. He then claims that Rajan too, like his creator, exemplifies the same paradox:

Most readers today, in this world of shifting populations, will recognise the general problem facing Maniam’s protagonist [i.e. Rajan]. How does the individual pull up cultural roots and retain a sense of life’s significance; how can one *not* divest oneself of a specific group identity in this modern age of levelling multiplicity? Moreover, how do you hold to the supports of ethnic [minority] identity while affirming nationality, especially when your nation defines itself officially in terms of another [i.e. Malay] race and culture? (1993: x)

Sharrad's searching questions suggests that he views Rajan not as a migrant (despite having described him as one) but an alienated Malaysian caught in a dilemma where he can neither pull up his cultural roots nor not pull them up without losing "a sense of life's significance . . . in this modern age of levelling multiplicity". It is also a dilemma which – if we read Sharrad correctly – makes it impossible for Rajan to identify himself simultaneously as an ethnic minority and a 'true Malaysian' because only the Malay race fits the latter description.

The weighty issues Sharrad raises are not extraneous to Malaysia. As we have discussed in Chapter 2, the country's political system *is* founded upon the logic of Malay supremacy. To quote Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia: "The Malays are not just the *pribumi* or indigenous community but also the people to whom this country belongs" (Cheah 1996: 66). Also, notions like culture and nationality which Sharrad invokes are crucial considerations in any debate on identity formation. The problem here is that the issues Sharrad raises are *not* the same issues directly confronting Rajan. The "general problem" facing the protagonist-narrator has nothing to do with having to decide if he should hold on to or let go of his "cultural roots" (Sharrad 1993: x). Neither has it to do with having to shift "*from the stifling insularity of cultural boundedness*" to open-mindedness, as argued by Wong (emphasis added, Wong 2000). The text makes it amply clear that Rajan need not unbind himself from his culture simply because he has never been bound to it. Rajan is a non-conformist,

always wary of being “trapped by the past” (*IFC* 76). He is the exact opposite of Santhi, his wife, who needs to periodically “re-immense herself in the [Hindu-Indian] life and values from which she had come” (102) in order to feel ‘at home’ within herself. For not holding fast to the belief that absolute fidelity to one’s culture is a form of heroism, Rajan even earns himself, in a dream sequence, harsh rebuke from a faceless crowd of Indians referred to by his friend, Ramasamy, as “our kind of people”:

When I am sitting in some Indian restaurant, they crowd around me with leering faces and say, ‘What are you eating? Rice and curry? Where does the taste come from? From women whose Indian arms sweated to grind the spices.’ They get nasty . . . When I go to a friend’s funeral, they heat broad drums over the fire, swill toddy and chant at me: Who will beat the drums for you when you die? Who will sing your praises? Who will tell the world the story of your life? Which wife will beat her breast for you? (*IFC* 155-6)

Similar to Ravi in *TR*, Rajan in *IFC* demonstrates no interest in practising the rites and rituals of the culture into which he was born and to which he has never shown passionate attachment. He is in fact even more disinclined to do so by the novel’s conclusion. After returning from a perspective-altering journey to the north of the country, he openly objects for the first time to his wife’s wish to organise a *puja* (Hindu ritual) to celebrate his homecoming. Forthrightly Rajan tells Santhi not to “waste time or money on any ceremony” (*IFC* 172). The wife

insists, arguing that it is necessary for her and the children. Rajan gives in and goes through the ceremony for her sake, but with indifference:

“You’ve to fast for a day,” Santhi told me after being in consultation with the priest [who “looked an incongruous figure not because he was archaic in a modern setting but because he pretended to know so much and wield so much power over the women”].

“I don’t have to do anything,” I said, not quite angry. “Do anything you want but leave me out of it.”

“But you’re the most important person in this ceremony,” she protested.

“You make me important,” I said. (*IFC* 172)

So if Rajan has always-already decided where precisely he stands in relation to his wife’s Hindu-Indian Thing, what then is the nature of his life-crisis? How is it related to the logic of freedom we traced earlier in our analysis of *TR*, and to Maniam’s description of *IFC* as a novel “which deals with all three races” and in which “things are reenacted” (Tan 1998: 249)? Our analysis of *IFC* which will be guided by these key questions will commence in the next section and take us to the conclusion of this chapter.

## Father and Son

*IFC* opens with Rajan brooding in solitude, darkly admitting that he has now, in his middle-age, lost his mooring in life. Where there was once an aggressive ambition to make his mark in the world and influence the times, and where there were the supreme self-confidence and drive which took him out of the rubber plantation and put him in his “present status of house and property owner, with a solid bank account” (*IFC* 3), there is now only a “terrifying emptiness” (25), a “zero in [his] mind” (1). It is as if the soft gnawing of conscience he has had for the longest time of there being “something else to life besides money and success” (102) is only now exerting its true impact.

Rajan’s loss of self-certainty and contraction into himself is strangely something that ‘just occurs’, an unplanned event set in motion by something as commonplace as a “blade of light [he] saw one evening” – not a consciously-willed or “deliberate” minimalising of his world, as Wong suggests (2000). Withdrawn from his immediate world, wife and children included, he finds his thoughts constantly returning on its own accord to “events and people [he] had thought hardly worth paying attention to” (*IFC* 3). Like a “helpless witness” (25), his mind turns to his late father who had migrated to Malaya on a ship filled with human dung, hoping to find “heaven” but instead he found “insect-gnawing ravines” (7) and no escape like the last time but through cheap alcohol. “Wife and children. Just cycle after cycle. Can’t break the turning of the wheel. I tried” (7),



his despairing father had lamented in a moment of toddy-soaked indiscretion. Rajan also recalls his father's dying days, how his "puffy cheeks and premature grey hair traced the history of cynicism" (42), how he "dreamed too much and achieved too little" (46), and how this "showed in the disproportion he carried about with him: this distended belly and the rarely used, thin limbs" (46). Most traumatic of all, he remembers how his father coughed up blood and died with "his eyes closed to the world in which he had found no home" (22). Taking into account the trauma Rajan experienced early in childhood, it is no surprise that he should be driven by the desire to evade the ill fate which broke his father's spirit and to obtain for himself life security above all else (40). He works hard and succeeds in making a somebody out of himself. Yet despite that, he is unable to sever the umbilical cord which links him to his unlucky father: "Though I scoffed at him, how strange it is now to almost look and be like him" (3).

Already here we can see the eternal return making its comeback. "Is it possible for despair to be inherited through the blood? . . . Can memories be inherited?" (*IFC* 3-4), searches Rajan. "Can repetition make actual the past?" (4); that is, to put it in context, by 'involuntarily' returning to the past over and over again to re-find himself and exorcise the blankness that has come into his mind (just as his late father kept retelling the same stories to young Rajan as an unconscious means of 'forgetting' the one immutable constant in his life: suffering), might Rajan unwittingly confer upon the past the reality it never had,

thus ending up even more lost to himself? *IFC* provides no direct answer, although it is possible that, by placing a question mark over the reliability of Rajan's memory, and by implication his reliability as narrator of his retrospective self-account, the text is cueing the reader to appraise the 'facts' with the critical eye of a doubting Thomas and to look out for inconsistencies in Rajan's reconstruction of the past, for moments when certainty falters or words fail. The text, we should note, is punctuated by several such moments: "Is this a trick of the mind or a fact?" (136); "Actually, I don't know what I mean" (132); "I may be wrong, of course . . . But from where I stand, as one who has survived the chaos of the mind, I feel doubt is necessary before clarity can be grasped" (144).

Just as Ravi's memory is bracketed, so too the consistency of the central characters in the novel – all of whom are, as is easily overlooked, never what they appear at first glance. Take Rajan's Tamil-speaking father who, according to Wong, represents "the obvious, Rajan's [Hindu-Indian] cultural heritage" (2000). Although Wong neither elaborates nor illustrates "the obvious", it is not difficult to see what she is aiming at. True, Rajan's father used to carry the pubescent Rajan away with the story about his ancestors, early voyagers from India who braved jungles and seas to build a fabulous ancient kingdom (a "little India just here") in pre-Muslim Malaysia (*IFC* 6). (The little India is possibly an allusion to the lost Hindu-Buddhist civilisation known as *Gangga Negara* or 'A City on the Ganges' in Sanskrit, one of the ruins of which was discovered in Perak, a northern

state in Malaysia.) It is also true that Rajan's father had openly regretted how the same voyagers allegedly lost the opportunity "to lead and to rule" the land because, being "not right in the head", they chose to go "again on their unquenchable travels" instead of remaining in the land where they had built their temples.

Based on the evidence, one might be tempted to agree with Wong that Rajan's embittered father represents his "cultural heritage" after all (2000). The question is: if the father truly incarnates Indianness ('what being an Indian is all about'), would he have troubled to bemoan, like a disillusioned egalitarian multiculturalist, the fragmentation of Malaysia along racial lines even before the advent of independence? To quote the words Rajan remembers his father using: "People [came] together like brothers from the same family. Not strangers from different countries. Look where we are now. Shadows in the darkness, not even hearing the other person breathe. Not even caring" (*IFC* 6). As for the father's apparent longing for India, might it not be viewed as a false longing for something he never possessed in the first place? Recall that Rajan's father left India to escape suffering, not because it was "a motherland flowing with milk and honey" (105). India, whose harsh poverty migrants had cursed before they left, only grew "into the tree of plenty" in their "hunger-filled dreams" when the land to which they had migrated offered them no "work to earn the money for their food" (105).

There are unmistakable similarities between Rajan's father and Periathai, Ravi's grandmother in *TR*. Both figures are first generation working class migrants and traditionalists in comparison to Rajan and Ravi. But unlike Periathai who bears her lot stoically until the final days of her life, Rajan's father is a highly inconsistent character whose neurotic attitude towards the same object of contemplation shifts constantly, often from pole to pole. The India in his mind is simultaneously a "dry, gossip-diseased . . . land" of suffering (*IFC* 7) and a blessed land from which sprung artisans of exquisite temples and temple bells whose pure music could hold "together the whole world" (6). In the same way, the stars are cursed for pulling him to Malaya like a blind bat to fruit trees, adulated for the shine of its benevolent light which led the bold ancient voyagers to Malaya, and subsequently berated for leading the same voyagers away from the magnificent little India away from India they had built for themselves.

In contrast to Periathai who derives enjoyment from subordinating herself to the Hindu-Indian Thing she had brought with her from India, Rajan's father in *IFC* used to dream, prior to his spirit's defeat, of going beyond the boundaries of the familiar, namely the rubber plantation. Recall, as we saw in Chapter 2, that rubber plantations in those days were "a death trap yawning to engulf the surplus population of India" (Sandhu 1993: 153). It was a place of "much suffering and futility" in which the majority of Indian labourers tragically chose to remain because they saw the unknown beyond "as some territory of even greater pain"

(*IFC* 44). Finally and most significant of all, although the two characters enter the graves in a state of unredeemable brokenness, there is nothing in *IFC* to suggest that Rajan's father precipitates towards death for the same Thing which Periathai volitionally elevates from constative to imperative. His is ultimately the curse of having been born poor and insignificant – a bitter curse he shares with other Indian migrants living under the same treacherous conditions, all shuffled and manipulated through life by forces over which they have no mastery: "The source was external, a national crisis or words radiating from the white administrators" (43). It is also the selfsame curse young Rajan, propelled by the "desire to be the master of [his] own destiny" (68), must cancel out of existence or be reaped by it.

### **Attitudes of Thought**

In contrast to *TR*, *IFC* does not detail the first steps of the protagonist's transition from the rubber plantation to white-collarship. An entire period is summarised in several lines before the narrative focuses on Rajan in his young adult years working in an isolated interior north of the country. There he stays until shortly after the death of his colleague, Lee Shin, by which time he has gained "financial security and more, a nest-egg with which to strike out on [his] own" (*IFC* 66). He subsequently relocates to a larger town south of the country, sets up his own business in land development, and comes to the premature conclusion that he has



“finally freed” himself from the force which “killed [his] father and his generation”. Thereafter the narrative takes a sudden political turn.

The scene marking the change in direction pivots around the controversial demolition of old colonial buildings. (The incident occurs not long after Rajan moves to the new town.) The buildings, including the District Office and the Court House, “so full of history and culture” (*IFC* 69), are to be destroyed to make way for new post-independence development projects. Reactions to the proposal are surprisingly spirited. “The whole town seethed with talk and there were many camps, attitudes and opinions” (69). Rajan is reluctantly drawn into the fray by his friends Ramasamy (an Indian bookshop proprietor whose “smiling, ageless” face shines “with a kind of velvety assurance”) and Jimmy Kok (a “nebulous” Chinese man who inherited his rubber-dealer business from his father). Despite their heated arguments, the three men agree in principle that the best way to turn the demolition issue from a “simple town affair” into a “national concern” is to do it through the newspapers. To generate controversy and create a semblance of genuine debate, they send in to the press letters containing several contrasting viewpoints. But “when the letters went out to the papers, it became clear that they were not playing a game of strategy” (72).

Rajan, in his retrospective account of the episode, is brow-raisingly contemptuous of the published letters, particularly Ramasamy’s and Jimmy’s –

both of whom, he says, had then truly become “the voice of the public” (*IFC* 74). In his opinion, Ramasamy’s letter betrayed “pretensions to progressive thinking” (73) while Jimmy’s “contradicted the way he presented himself to the world . . . He didn’t come through . . . as an uncertain searching man. What he said seemed to confirm what he secretly believed” (74). Furthermore, says Rajan, both letters displayed “much self-congratulation and mutual admiration but hardly any original thought.” The following are extracts of Ramasamy’s and Jimmy’s letters, followed by Rajan’s response:

A man’s life is not his life; a country’s progress is not its own progress. The events that time brings [shape] the destinies of both. And time flows like the river, moves like the sea. It can push against the banks and pull them down; it can wash against the shore and take away the land. But both the river and the sea can also . . . leave us with more. These buildings the Council want to pull down are the more that has been given to us. These structures that the British have left behind do not belong to them alone. They do not only reveal their domination and culture. They reveal us too. They reveal us as shaped by forces that have worked within the larger force – time. (Ramasamy, *IFC* 74)

...

We are not against progress in this country or have become members of that invisible group that ‘obstructs the sense of belonging to the country.’ We merely question the wisdom behind

the words 'sense of belonging to the country.' This expression has been used to cover, ironically, almost everything from eating habits to the games that ought to be played in this country. I assert that everything that has happened in this country belongs to us . . . These buildings are records and reminders of the systems that have come down to us. In destroying them, we are destroying our past and, more importantly, our future. (Jimmy, *IFC* 74)

...

The underlying reason, and the main one, why people are so opposed to the demolition . . . is simple: they cannot bear to see what has given them a sense of security be brought to rubble in a few hours. The destruction of the familiar is a destruction of the comfortable. If we look deeply into the phenomenon, we will discover the imperative for why these buildings will have to go . . . What do they tell us about the spirit of the people [i.e. the colonialists] who built them?

They leapt across the sea of the unknown to discover new territories for themselves. They left behind themselves the safe and the domestic to carve out a new land for themselves. There was no continuity, past or future. Once they got here, they looked into the resources available and built a familiar environment around themselves. They transplanted their language, culture, systems of order, justice and administration.

That is what we have to do: make a great leap. Now that we have the land we have to build the systems that will support our hopes

and ambitions. We must not allow ourselves to be trapped by the past, by the familiar. We must go forward into the great unknown. (Ravi, *IFC* 76)

Few who read Rajan's letter would disagree that it takes great courage to let go of the comforting familiar and make that dangerous leap into the unknown. (We have seen this positively exemplified in *TR* by Ravi who 'finds himself' only after he 'loses himself'.) At the same time, however, the two overlapping views which Rajan summarily dismisses are clearly not without merit either. (This holds true irrespective of whether Ramasamy and Jimmy mean what they say or are merely pretending to be progressive thinkers. In Lacan, truth resides not in what one means to say but in what *is* said.) Neither have the issues raised by Ramasamy and Jimmy become irrelevant in Malaysia today where the few remaining colonial buildings continue to be targeted for destruction by neglect or 'redevelopment' by certain overzealous authorities. As Jimmy poses, must every sign of otherness (the ugly past, the colonial culprit and so forth) be expunged from sight and memory before the country and its people may be said to be progressing? Are those who question the practice of narrow nationalism really obstructing "the sense of belonging to the country" (*IFC* 74)? Similarly, and notwithstanding his use of well-worn metaphors, Ramasamy is not unjustified in arguing that colonial structures do not unmediatedly signify the Other's "domination and culture" (*IFC* 74). If the structures are perceived as purely and necessarily representing 'the one who did this to me', then might the reason not

perhaps be due to the perceiver's unwillingness to see that the Other who is supposed to impede my fulfilment is in truth the very precondition of my self-identity; "without it, I would lose the big Culprit, the point by reference to which my subjective position acquires its consistency"? (Žižek 1991a: 71)

Rajan's approach to the controversy is directly counterposed to Ramasamy's and Jimmy's shared approach. While the latter acknowledges the limitation and dependency of each identity on the other, the former views the Other as irreducibly Other (that is, as radically exterior to himself) and takes himself to be a motionless tautology of 'I = I'. In this precise sense, Rajan's attitude of thought or "mode of action and belief" (Žižek 1991b: 164) is similar to Ravi's in the early stages of his life: they both occupy the position of the Hegelian Beautiful Soul. As we have discussed, Beautiful Soul is a self-centric attitude of thought that refuses to "decipher in the disorder of the world the truth of its own subjective position" (Žižek 1991a: 100). It is close to what Maniam describes as the "mightier-fightier-than-thou" attitude of closing oneself off from "wider horizons and bigger worlds" (Wilson 1993: 23). We saw this exemplified in Chapter 6 by Ravi who only realises 'after the fact' that he too had been as guilty of subordinating himself to his particular Thing as his 'stupid' father and grandmother were to theirs. By the same logic, Rajan in *IFC* wrongly perceives himself as a neutral observer of a world whose regressive ways he denounces as vigorously as he protests his innocence. In addition, he is possessed by the need to



be proven right, that individuals like Ramasamy and Jimmy are working against him and the “discovery of a common ground for identity” (*IFC* 73) even though they are working *towards* it, as their letters attest. By overlooking the invertedness of his world, Rajan ends up contributing to the preservation of the unfortunate conditions he bemoans. This is implied by Rajan who says in retrospect that his letter to the press had indirectly strengthened the Town Council’s case for the demolition of the colonial buildings. That in turn paved the way for the actual razing of the buildings – “planned modernization of the town” in official terms but something shadier in reality:

Some of the Town Council members sought me out and congratulated me. They looked on me as a valuable source of sympathy and support for the planned modernization of the town. However, I still detected an aloofness in them that told me they had more up their sleeves than I could ever know. (*IFC* 77)

Beautiful Soul is one of three ‘forms of consciousness’ the subject may adopt in relation to the Thing around which his desire turns. As with the other two forms which we will examine subsequently, it is not merely an insular attitude one assumes in one’s own private world. The person I cannot not be, my relationship with the interior of my being, the symbolic universe I inhabit, the radical Other thwarting the realisation of ‘who I really am’, the obstacles in my path to the lost (Nation-)Thing that makes me unique – all that exist in the same space as “the one

in which political parties intervene and in which elections are fought” (Laclau 1991: 95). As *IFC*’s demolition scene illustrates, the line between public and private is “an unstable frontier constantly trespassed, with personal autonomy investing public aims and the private becoming politicized” (Mouffe 1996: 3).

Here we need to emphasise that Beautiful Soul is not a racial positioning but an attitude of thought. To render this palpable, let us consider Maniam’s portrayal of the melancholic Lee Shin, a Beautiful Soul whom Wong mistakes for “the Chinese . . . consciousness” (2000). No doubt, Lee Shin is marked in *IFC* as an ethnic Chinese and a Sinophile who is “so self-contained that nothing seem[s] to touch him” (*IFC* 31, 34). He obsessively collects things Chinese – “furniture, crockery, [intricate bamboo] flute, banners, calligraphy and decorated dragons” – as if he is “trying to convert a country foreign by creating cultural landscape and landmarks in which he could be at home” (162). On top of that, Rajan says, “his preference for the so-called virtuous life could disgust anyone” (54). These are indeed unflattering descriptions but do they make Lee Shin guilty of being representative of the Chinese consciousness? What is the Chinese consciousness anyway? Is it a natural property essential to all Chinese, something only the ‘real Chinese’ possess? Can one opt not to have it? Can a non-Chinese possess it? And what about Rajan, Ravi, Periathai and other Beautiful Souls in Maniam’s writings? Do these Indian figures not share with Lee Shin the *same* self-denying attitude of thought towards their Thing?

Wong's thesis that Lee Shin personifies the Chinese consciousness is faulty – not because the Chinese in Malaysia are 'not really like that' but because her notion of the Chinese being inherently insular and Chinese-centric ultimately has nothing to do with the Chinese. The fascinating 'conceptual Chinese' painted by Wong only functions as "a way of stitching up the inconsistency of our own ideological system" (Žižek 1989: 48), the evocation of which falsely "*explains everything*: all of a sudden "things become clear", perplexity is replaced by a firm sense of orientation" (1991a: 18). The operation we have here is homologous to the way in which the "Jewish plot" allows anti-Semites to "unify in a single large narrative the experiences of economic crisis, "moral decadence" and loss of values, political frustration and "national humiliation", and so on." It "*blocks* any further inquiry into the social meaning (social mediation) of the phenomena that arouse fear in the common man" (1993: 149).

### **Law of the Heart**

For the same reasons, it is erroneous of Wong to represent Zulkifli (or Zul, the Malay villager in *IFC*) as *the* Malay consciousness and to then simplistically equate Malay consciousness with authentic oneness with the land and the antithesis of "migrant" consciousness (Wong 2000). Of course, Zul is identified in the novel as an ethnic Malay and, wryly, as representative of "the oldest

inhabitant of the country" (*IFC* 162). He is not dissimilar to Pak Mat, a character in S. Othman Kelantan's *Perjudian* ('Gambling'), who proudly declares "I am a real peasant. My land is mine for the whole of my life" (Hooker 2000: 327). *IFC* also makes it apparent that Zul believes in his heart that only Malays like himself "really understand this country" and outsiders like Rajan can "only dishonour the land" (*IFC* 92). All that is spelled out from the outset, when Zulkifli tries to get Rajan to discover the spirit of the land "as my people did" so that he (Rajan) would "know what this country is" (93) really about:

"You seem to know everything about it [the land/country]," I [Rajan] say.

"Through the instinct that has travelled to me through the blood of my ancestors," he [Zul] says.

"Are you saying I can't have such an instinct?"

"You don't have ancestors here," he says. (*IFC* 92-3)

The binary oppositions set up in the text are hard to miss: Zulkifli against Rajan, Malay against non-Malay, 'son of the soil' against 'outsider'. The question is: does *IFC* accept what it sets up as necessary, ideal and/or inevitable? Does it affirm the racist logic of eternal Malay supremacy which allows Zul to claim preeminence over Rajan? Or does it contest the said logic and offer up an

alternative and a more inclusive re-imagining of the nation? We contend that *IFC* takes the latter path – not because it wants to demonstrate that Zul embodies the “Malay consciousness” (Wong 2000) and consequently that all Malays are as self-conceited as Zul. It would be illogical to formulate Zul as that since the self-conceit he exemplifies and which in turn overdetermines his character is not a racial feature but an attitude of thought which anyone can assume.

Conceitedness is not the birthright of any one race but it is descriptive of Malays, including those in the political and literary circles, whose defining “psychocultural trait . . . is the assumed superiority and legitimacy of their culture, society, and institutions” (Tham 1981a: 272). Analysing the works of modern Malay writers like Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Shahnnon Ahmad, Muhammad Dahlan (Arena Wati) and Abdullah Sidek, Tham Seong Chee notes that even though the literary intelligentsia speak out strongly against what they see as immorality, inhumanity, hypocrisy and irreligiosity, they never question their self-foundation: “the spirit of the *adat*, namely the traditional behavioural precepts that underlie correct behaviour as conceived by Malays” (1981a: 255). The validity and appropriateness of the Malay social system – both as a framework of social and economic modernisation and a source of values – is accepted as simply given.

This strange habit of Malay-centric Malays to not question the foundation of their being has its roots in the Malay system of the old. Malay classical and



semi-historical works like the seventeenth-century *Sejarah Melayu* ('Malay Annals') and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* ('Story of Hang Tuah') reveal that the system, enmeshed with Islam and centred around the institution of the sultanate, upheld unquestioning loyalty as a virtue. It forbade the challenging of Authority and taught commoners to believe that breaking with the *adat* was as unthinkable as trampling on the head of one's parents. In this autocratic world, oral literature – proverbs and maxims, customary sayings, riddles and puns, animal stories, legends, folk tales, and the *pantun* (a quatrain sung or spoken with social intentions) – functioned not as today's 'sacred' repository of culture but as an ideological apparatus for maintaining the established feudal order. It "validated traditional social norms and emphasized the correctness of the *adat* or customary practices" (Tham 1981a: 254).

Modern Malay literature is not dissimilar to the pre-modern. It is neo-traditional insofar as it habitually rationalises the infallibility of the Malay way of life, the legitimacy of Malay hegemony and the superiority of Islam as solution to the Malay community's inner conflicts.<sup>49</sup> Islam, says Shahnun Ahmad, "guarantees the right path that is valid for guiding oneself, [the] family, community and country" (Solehah Ishak 1998: 83). It is "the true sign from God", unlike "the irrational, non-scientific and fairy-tale ideas like the values before the

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Virginia Hooker's analysis of *Kepulangan* ('The Home-Coming') (2000), a novel by Fatimah Busu which campaigns for a community 'home-coming' to traditional Malay values.

arrival of Islam.” Even before the heydays of ‘ASAS 50’,<sup>50</sup> it has been the norm for the majority of Malay writers to show in their works how Malay ways are superior to others (Hooker 2000: 307). Malay *kampung* (‘rural-traditional’) life – its values, institutions, problems and personalities – is framed as the “objective and permanent reality” (Tham 1981b: 226-7). *Kampung* folks are painted poor and in need of development and improvement in “their way of thinking to a way that makes them feel the necessity to defend their own kind when threatened with the strength of another” (Solehah Ishak 1998: 76). They are not paranoid, just good simple folks striving to make an honest living and to submit to Almighty Allah.

Considering the above, it is no surprise that the characteristic impression readers get from reading Malay literature is the “kindness, magnanimity, and understanding of the Malays, partly a manifestation of the traditional Malay moral code (*budi*) and more accurately a manifestation of perceived cultural and political superiority” (Tham 1981a: 273). In Ibrahim Omar’s novel *Desa Pingitan* (‘Secluded Village’), a Chinese family survives the Japanese occupation only because Malays were kind enough to offer them shelter. In Abdullah Hussain’s *Interlok* (‘Interlogue’), the reconstitution of Ching Huat’s family after the Malaysian Emergency “is attributed in no small part to the actions and

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<sup>50</sup> ASAS 50 or Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (‘the Generation 50 Writers’) was founded in the 1950s. It consisted of radical Malay nationalists-writers whose avowed concerns were to awaken and defend the Malay race through literature.

understanding, indeed the forgiveness, of Lazim who symbolizes the exploited Malay in the hand of the Chinese businessman" (Tham 1981a: 273). Less subtly, Shahnnon Ahmad, in his novel *Menteri* ('Minister'), "tells the non-Malays that they are in Malaya because of Malay generosity and magnanimity" (Tham 1981a: 274). Tham's study provides many more illustrations but the pattern is consistent:

The [Malay] literary elites accept the foregoing framework of ideas and thus look at communal problems and issues from the vantage point of their community. Their claim to be committed writers, as men with a mission to shape ideas and mould beliefs, is therefore communally oriented. They are the literary intelligentsia . . . concerned with the evaluation, examination, formulation, and transmission of thoughts and ideas, but they are not in Mannheim's conceptualization 'free intelligentsia'. (Tham 1981b: 227)<sup>51</sup>

The writers' inability to break free from "the psychological and cultural moorings of [their] native self" (Tham 1981b: 225) is due in no small part to the intellectual climate created by the modern-day Malay political class. Certainly, Malay writers and Malay politicians do not always see eye-to-eye. The former can be and have been highly critical of the political class – the latter described as "able to feed from other people's corpses" (Hooker 2000: 333) in S. Othman's *Perjudian* ('Gambling') and as pieces of excreta in Shahnnon Ahmad's *Shit @*

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<sup>51</sup> A student of Georg Lukács, Karl Mannheim defined the socially-unattached or free(-floating) intelligentsia as agents unbound in loyalty to any particular group and who are open-minded enough to examine and critique their own social moorings.

*Pukimak @ PM*. In spite of their differences, however, players from both fields share the same compulsive obsession with the Malay race and the “ideology of ‘rights’ for Malays who in the pre-modern era had none” (Hooker 2000: 360). (Recall that pre-modern ordinary Malay never had ‘rights’ before their ruler, just as Rajan’s father never tasted the nectar of India he purports to have lost.)

Even before official links between literature and politics were established in 1958 (with the launch of the first Malay novel-writing competition), agents from both sides have directly or indirectly worked together to ensure the flourishing of Malay-centric literature. In 1958, budding writers were urged to use their talents to sustain and valorise the Malay race. They were and still are provided sustained patronage by the UMNO-dominated Malaysian government which sees them as the hope for bringing the race “to an era which is glorious in good books” (former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak, in Hooker 2000: 260-1). More than four decades later, they continue to be trained to do the same.

“Malay literature has not come of age”, admits A. Samad Ismail, a veteran journalist and an early-day member of ‘ASAS 50’ (Maniam 1997: 21). “It seems to be operating within its own community. It is too sheltered and there is no free development.” Consider for instance the 1995 ‘New Malay Novel’ Competition which called for Malay writers to produce works containing “great concepts for

the race, nation and religion” (Hooker 2000: 350). Writers should discuss *Melayu Baru* (‘New Malays’) who “revere their past history and civilisation” and possess a “resolute spirit in facing the twenty-first century in the new industrialised *Malay nation*” (emphasis added, 2000: 351). The winner of the competition was Saloma Mat Lajis. Although a product of the late twentieth century, her novel *Pelangi Tengah Hari* (‘Midday Rainbow’) “displays many points of continuity with the narratives of the early part of the century. The Malay race remains at its heart.”

The narcissistic attitude of thought we have just described above has a special name in Hegelian philosophy; it is called ‘Law of the Heart’. Similar to Beautiful Soul, Law of the Heart treasures its being-for-self. It takes pleasure in the excellence of its own nature, believing that it alone were truly pure and good. Unlike the Soul, however, *the Heart actually seeks to impose as universal ordinance its inner Law which it mistakes for the necessary Law of Everybody, as Law of the Land* (Žižek 1993: 267). It “tries to elevate this heart-felt sentimentality to the level of ethics, to an articulate philosophy which applies to anyone other than oneself” (Solomon 1983: 507). That, the Heart does with the earnestness of a high purpose, as exemplified by Malay loyalists in Malaysia and Zul in *IFC*.

Malay loyalists are not only unable to break free from the moorings of their native self, they also want ethnic minorities in Malaysia to ‘acculturate’ to



the 'host' (Malay) culture. As Mohd. Taib Osman opines, the latter should use the Malay language, dress in an "almost similar" fashion to Malays, demonstrate visible similarities with Malays and acculturate Malay habits and customs into their "transplanted culture" (1988: 133). Parallel to that, Zul in *IFC* is not only unable to 'get over' the Tiger qua primordial Law of his Heart, he also wants Rajan to submit to it. He wants Rajan to "moult", to free himself completely from "the burden of being responsible for [him]self" by yielding to the "more encompassing and powerful" (*IFC* 142) Tiger that is the Malay-Thing.

The Malay-Thing is the Law of Zul's Heart, the presupposed Guarantor of Zul's ontological consistency and claim to pre-eminence over Rajan. It is the Thing posited as holding together the Malay race as uniquely distinct from other races, something accessible only to Malays, something 'they', the others, can neither partake in nor grasp (Žižek 1993: 201). The Malay-Thing is represented by the Tiger, a feared animal that is "more than an animal" (*IFC* 100), "the oldest symbol of our [Malay] civilization" (129), an integral symbol on Malaysia's national coat-of-arms, and a cultural symbol of superstitious significance in the Malay community:<sup>52</sup>

"You must see the tiger."

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<sup>52</sup> A Malay belief has it that shamans, practitioners of *pancak silat* (a Malay martial art) and ordinary mortals with supernatural knowledge have the power to transform into a tiger or be possessed by its spirit (Wessing 1986: 97).

"What tiger?" I [Rajan] said.

"Are you afraid?"

"You want me to go tiger hunting?" I said.

...

"We've to go on a trip to tigerland," he said.

"Tigerland?"

"Don't you know that the tiger lived in this country long before we came?" he said. "We must look at the country through its eyes."

"Have you done this yourself?"

"No, my forefathers went through that experience," he said. "I want to experience what they saw. You must come with me. Then, maybe you'll believe. (*IFC* 93)

...

We must see through its eyes. Feel through its body. We must become the tiger. (Zul in *IFC* 100)

To Rajan, Zul professes belief in the goodness of "free[ing] ourselves from thoughts given to us by the past" (*IFC* 96). Otherwise "we can't move forward". Yet in reality Zul – like the aforementioned Malay loyalists who saw themselves as ostensible agents of change – enjoys nothing more than to hark

back to the past, to recapture the Tiger-Thing by surrendering his self-responsibility to it. In addition, Zul also desires Rajan to desire his desire to become one with the Tiger. So strong is his desire that he coerces the latter into accompanying him on a journey into Tigerland. From the outset and for almost the entire journey which Maniam narrates in 'magical realist' mode, Zul takes charge, self-assuredly leading Rajan through crossings into the interior of the jungle, beyond a certain mythical tree stump which marks "the door to the tiger's world" (*IFC* 95). Along the way they undergo surreal transformations: strangely open to each other, "overcome by something beyond us" (97), then locked in a battle-of-wills over the appropriate way of approaching the Tiger. On the first night, Zul keeps up a long conversation with Rajan about his past in a voice "rich with the memory of his ancestors" (94). The next morning his face takes on a haunted look, "filled as he was with the necessity to discover a way through to his ancestral memory" (95). The closer they get to the Tiger, the more deeply possessed Zul becomes.

Rajan, by contrast, takes the headstrong approach. When Zul confides that the Tiger is watching them, he boldly suggests that they outwatch it. To Zul's prescription "We've to leave everything behind . . . We've to be nothing to know the unknowable" (*IFC* 100), Rajan self-queries "Why do I have to submit to his fantastical talk?" When asked to "take on the character of the tiger" so as to come into its presence, he informs Zul that he would rather kill the beast by surprising

it. Zul insists “You must surrender your self to be the other self” (101), until Rajan’s curiosity finally dissipates, causing him to recoil from Zul’s “desire to reveal his private vision to [him]” (94). Zul, however, is not to be resisted. He goes into a ritual on Rajan’s behalf, against his will. As Rajan recounts:

All I remember is the incessant chanting that came from his lips. Though the words poured from him, I only remember their sound . . . it even affected my sight. The jungle became, suddenly, a seething mass of colours that glowed as if in a subterranean landscape. They fell all over my body in bands that were at first warm but later became almost intolerably hot. They didn’t actually burn my skin but I could feel it peeling and leaving me in a vulnerable nothingness. Was that when I turned and ran? Or much, much later when my personality threatened to dissolve into nothingness? All the time the chant poured from Zulkifli’s throat like an ageless invitation to disown whatever I was and to merge with the Tiger. I didn’t wait for that to happen. (*IFC* 101)

The excursion ends with neither Zul nor Rajan sighting the Tiger they had gone into the jungle to ‘hunt’ – but what is the failure symbolic of? What is it that Rajan hopes to attain by reaching out to the elusive Tiger qua Malay-Thing? And why is he unwilling and unable “to go the whole road” (132) and merge with it. To answer these questions satisfactorily, it is necessary that we take a detour through ‘Haunting the Tiger’ (*HTT*), Maniam’s short story and prototype to *IFC*’s

jungle scene.<sup>53</sup> As will be elucidated, *HTT* shares several key similarities and differences with the novel it inspired. It also contains original segments excluded from *IFC* – all of which are helpful in shedding light on the symbolism of Rajan's journey into the heart of Tigerland.

### Haunting the Tiger

As in *IFC*, *HTT* portrays Zul as wanting Muthu (Rajan's precursor) to admire his Malay-Thing, to capitulate to the embodiment of what is "deep inside" him (*HTT* 42), namely the Tiger. Zul wants to show Muthu that "he was somebody" (43). Muthu in turn follows Zul into the jungle, hoping that sighting the Tiger will somehow enable him to "become somebody" (43). In *HTT* more than *IFC*, however, Zul's self-conceit and over-confidence in his "being of the land" (Maniam 1997: 20) is conveyed much more strongly. For example, when queried by Muthu if he too possesses the Thing he says his ancestors possessed, Zul claims with false humility that it is "deep inside [himself]. No need to show it so loudly to the world . . . Centuries of living here" (*HTT* 42). Also significantly amplified in *HTT* is the Indian protagonist's alienness in Zul's eyes, as illustrated by the following scene which did not make its way into *IFC*:

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<sup>53</sup> *HTT* was reworked into *IFC* about three years after it was first published.



“I know what’s wrong,” Zulkifli says. [The tiger] won’t show himself until the smells are gone.”

Zulkifli fixes Muthu with a surveying stare. Muthu becomes nervous.

“What smells?”

“Mind and body smells,” Zulkifli says.

Muthu is offended and turns away from him.

“Not in the way you can’t go near a person,” Zulkifli says confronting Muthu. “The clothes you wear, the thoughts you think. Where do they come from?”

“They’re just clothes and ideas,” Muthu says.

“They must fit into the place where the tiger lives.”

“Why must they fit in?” Muthu says. (*HTT* 45)

The most notable point of contrast between the two writings is the conclusion. In *IFC*, Rajan gets a second chance to ‘confront’ the Tiger (as will be elaborated). *HTT*’s Muthu, on the other hand, ends up a broken old man lying pathetically on his deathbed – sick and dying but unable to find peace in death because death would not come easily to him. Haunted by the Tiger he never got to

sight, all Muthu can do is to ramble on deliriously about how he now regrets having compromised his life and the lives of those close to him. Like Rajan towards *IFC*'s closing, he realises that he has wronged his wife by treating her like an object devoid of inner life from the day they married. He also realises that he has wronged himself by having crudely sought nothing but material wealth for the longest time:

Buying this house, land, becoming big man . . . Nothing in all these things. Only violence. Taking is violence . . . Just wanted the thing I could see, touch and be sure. What to be sure? I can't die. How can I die? The mind isn't full to be emptied. The body isn't there for the blood to go cold . . . This is the dying. Having not lived, this is the dying. (*HTT* 46)

Muthu's search for the Tiger has attracted considerable interest from commentators. Wong Phui Nam (a renowned Malaysian literary figure), for instance, interprets it as an inward quest for "the vital centres" of the self and a symbolic movement towards "interior night" (Tan 1998: 224-5). He explains that the interior night, which is based on the experience of mystics and contemplatives, consists of the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the soul, after which there is promise of mystical union. Muthu only makes it into the first night because he clings to "worldly acquisitiveness, the need for possession (wife, house, land)" (Tan 1998: 224). Wong makes a strong and interesting case in arguing that *HTT* finally indicts the "grasping attitudes prevalent at all levels of

economic life in our country” (Tan 1998: 224). Textual evidence may easily be gathered to support this reading. In fact, Maniam himself would probably support it, seeing that the philosophy he espouses is radically anti-materialistic: “I want to see destructuring so that man can get to be himself . . . I don’t see why human beings should serve out their lives in this materialistic sense” (Greet 1991: 7). Nonetheless, and without detracting from Wong’s interpretation, it is possible to show that the prime bone of Maniam’s contention is not capitalist modernity but “cultural entrapment”, the “reluctance to enter into perspectives offered by other cultures” (Maniam 1997: 21).

In his conference paper, ‘The New Diaspora’, Maniam provides his most elaborate interpretation of *HTT* yet. Consider his reading of Zul and Muthu which we may provisionally apply to *IFC*’s Zul and Rajan. According to Maniam, Zul lives by “the way of the tiger”, that is, he believes in “the continual and ritualistic immersion into the spirit of the land so as to be affirmed” (1997: 20). Muthu/Rajan, by contrast, lives by “the way of the chameleon”. He adapts and blends “into whatever economic, intellectual and social landscapes that are available.” While Zul believes in cultural purity and loyalty, Muthu/Rajan yearns for something less confining. On the symbolic level, Muthu/Rajan is looking for *Bangsa Malaysia*, a “much more seamless Malaysian society” that transcends race and religion (1997: 20). He seeks a national identity that *all* Malaysians can share. But he is unable to find it because it “has not yet been evolved . . . There

isn't a common reality accessible" to all. Consciously or otherwise, Malaysians in general have come to believe that a common Malaysian identity is an impossible dream, that superficial togetherness is the best one could hope for, and that "pragmatic tolerance" is the best option available to a country where race conquers all. Maniam concedes that pragmatic tolerance has, "at its most constructive level, generated mutual respect and the love for peace between and among the various races" in Malaysia (1997: 19-20). Ultimately, however, it makes for cultural entrapment. It ensures that "each community remains within its cultural territory and tries not to transgress into the cultural domains of other communities." It isolates and freezes everyone in their respective cultural enclaves. It closes off the borders of their awareness and puts them at risk of turning into Beautiful Souls, that is, subjects of narcissism who live in fear of besmirching the pure Thing of their culture.

Because the phenomenon of Beautiful Soul cuts across all boundaries, all ethnic communities in Malaysia would have in their fold members who believe that "extreme, even absurd, form of cultural loyalty" is a virtue (Maniam 1997: 22). However, unlike their non-Malay counterparts, Malay loyalists in the mould of the earlier-described Malay intelligentsia are by far the most active and vociferous in urging their community to defend and remain eternally faithful to their race and religion. Routinely in gatherings and through the media, they divide the nation and deepen their community's insecurity by reiterating over and again

that Malay privileges are far from secure from 'outside threats', the precise nature or identity of which is rarely made clear but is implicitly understood as referring to non-Malay Malaysians and the Christian West, both conceived as secretly wanting to steal the Malays' enjoyment of their special Thing. Towards that end Malay loyalists devote their time and energy instead of encouraging Malaysians of all backgrounds to genuinely work towards "interaction, acceptance, a process of growing towards something we can call 'us'" (Maniam, in Lim 1999a). Furthermore, Malay loyalists are the ones with the political clout to style multiethnic Malaysia after self-valorising images of their race and religion. They articulate and implement national policies in an idiom that is "highly ethnicized and deeply pro-Malay" (Shamsul 1998: 141). Most worrying of all, they use their status as 'sons of the soil' to impose upon ethnic minorities the Malay Law of their Heart which they mistake for the necessary Law of Everybody. As example, Maniam cites the Malaysian civil service which has long been veering towards a "code of ethics in terms of dress and manner which is closely aligned to Islamic manner" (Greet 1991: 3). It may be a good thing, Maniam says, but "in a way it is turning away from other cultures, which is a sad waste of cultural resources" (3). "Why make one culture dominant? Not because of its accumulated wisdom but its cultural arrogance" (Maniam, in Lim 1999a).

These are all crucial points we must bring to bear when reading the following popularly-quoted passage from Maniam's 'The New Diaspora':



The 'tiger' represents the land, Zulkifli the Malay and Muthu the Malaysian-born Indian. Muthu never makes the 'leap' for he is confronted by more than the sense of discretion for the other's nationalistic yearnings that tolerance implies . . . The leap is not made into a common culture for this common culture has not yet evolved. What Muthu discovers is that he has to cling to an inherited sense of culture, that is, Indian culture. (Maniam 1997: 20)

The above passage is not, as it appears, Maniam's interpretation of *HTT* in a nutshell. Maniam is far from simplistically suggesting that Malays are inherently oppressive and self-obsessed and that Indian Malaysians have no choice but to cling to the Indian culture because the sought-after Malaysian identity has not yet evolved. From the essay in which the passage occurs, we know that the real divide in Maniam's eyes is not between Malays and non-Malays but between those who want to "entrench themselves more deeply within their own cultures" and those who choose to "come out from [their cultural enclaves] and reach out to the world" (Maniam 1994a: 18). Put simply, the problem is attitude of thought, not race.

Apart from contradicting its context, the above passage also flies in the face of *HTT*, the text itself – how? Consider Maniam's description of Muthu as having to "cling to an inherited sense of culture, that is, Indian culture" (1997: 20). Reading *HTT*, one would scarcely find any evidence to suggest that Muthu

identifies with the Indian culture. Instead, what one would find is a self-centric individualist like Rajan who sees himself as someone set radically apart from everyone else and who shows no interest in things Indian. As a young man, Muthu refuses to return to India with his parents. "They want to return to the country from which they came. 'They can give up this land for a life they've known,' he thinks. 'But what do I have to give up?'" (*HTT* 41) After his parents set sail, he marries the young girl he had seen in a nearby estate, only to ignore "the innocence and the unbounded mysteries that lay hidden behind the sari-veiled figure." India(ness) is clearly not Muthu's Thing if his actions are anything to go by.

### **Law is Law**

That Muthu dies unfulfilled while Rajan, his successor, is given a second chance to 'capture' the Tiger seems to suggest Maniam had different sights for *IFC* when he reworked *HTT* into it. It is not unlikely that the three years between the publication of the two writings may have given Maniam time to refine the lesson he wants to impart via the Tiger episode. That perhaps explains why Rajan is not only spared Muthu's fate but is reunited with Zul many years after their failed encounter with the Tiger – a reunion which, as we shall see, paves the way for Rajan's arrival at a "more substantial grain of truth" and "a new openness to life" (*IFC* 167).

The reunion is prompted by a realisation that suddenly dawns on the unmoored middle-aged Rajan while reading a book given to him years ago by Sivasurian (Siva), an enigmatic friend and a vagrant-philosopher. A compendium of Siva's writings, the book has no title but it contains a section entitled 'Not a Story, Not a Chronicle' wherein Siva contemplates life and ethnic relations in pre-independent Malaysia of the 1940s. Interestingly, the country in Siva's account was already home to *Bangsa Malaysia* symbolically pursued by Rajan and Muthu. "There was so much togetherness, trust and innocence. We didn't behave like single men or women but more like a people with a common heart and mind" (*IFC* 111). "There was always sharing" (106) despite food shortages caused by the Japanese occupation of the country (between 1941 and 1945, twelve years prior to independence). Exchanges of small tokens of friendship between members of different ethnic communities were not uncommon:

I [Siva] gave him [Sulaiman, a Malay villager] some brinjals and maize; he gave me a comb of bananas and some groundnuts. These things became our kind of greeting and understanding. He [Sulaiman] came to Murugiah's house [where Siva stayed] and we sat under the tall, many-branched tree. We sat talking as man with man, not as people made different by their own kinds of worship and living.

...

Not only the two of us. There were meeting grounds where more of us gathered. (*IFC* 106)

All that changed when the Japanese surrendered and left the country. Invisible walls came up everywhere and people became peoples, always wary, suspicious and fearful of each other. “Now there were many countries inside that one country” (*IFC* 116). It is not clear if Maniam intends Siva’s idyllic account of Malaysia’s lost unity to be read as springing from “a memory, a vision, or both” (Tan 1998: 259). What is clear, though, is that it prompts Rajan to go on a journey “to that region where [he] can meet Zul and try to look at things [“life and country”] through a different lens” (*IFC* 118).

Rajan packs a bag and sets off on a journey north of the country to “bring back some people I [have] left out of my life” (*IFC* 119). On his way to the village where he hopes to locate Zul, he passages through small towns “barely touched by the modern rebuilding spirit” (120). In the town where his land development business has its origins, he chances upon his old friends, Jimmy and Ramasamy, now resembling the hemmed-in peoples Siva had encountered everywhere after the Japanese Occupation. “Jimmy Kok has become paunchy and is coarser in the face, which is heightened by the secretiveness of his eyes. Ramasamy simply rattles on, indifferent to what the others have to say” (121). When Rajan finally meets up with Zul (“Pak Zul – that’s how people address him

now”), he finds that the latter too has changed (*IFC* 121). Hospitable as to a stranger, Zul’s eyes glow with “suspicion and hostility” when he first set eyes on Rajan. The reception of Zul’s wife is no warmer: “Kak Jamilah did not hide her resentment and indifference towards me. All the time I stayed in her house . . . she kept away from me. She put the dinner and the lunch on the table and withdrew” (121). Rajan subsequently learns that misfortune has befallen Zul’s family since they last saw each other. Times have been bad in the *kampung*; “there isn’t enough land for our own planting” (122). Worse still, Zul’s eldest son, Mat, has been locked up in an institution after he went mad, ran wild and hacked a man to death.

According to Zul, it began when Mat left the village for the big city-life of Kuala Lumpur after being exposed to “ideas” through books and television (*IFC* 129). He wrote home during the first few months he was there. Then there was a long silence. A year later Mat came home. “He had long hair and had grown a beard. His mother nearly fainted. His brothers and sisters were too afraid to go near him” (123). He kept to himself, talked with some invisible friend for a long time and fought with enemies his distraught family could not see. At rare occasions he would open up to talk about the city where people “cut you down without mercy . . . trampled all over you [and] built large houses over your broken bones” (126). Mat alternated between silence, calmness and agitation until one



day, without warning, he erupted into murderous violence. With a curved grass-cutting knife, he ran amok, injuring three men and killing one in the process.

Zul has only seen his son once after the authorities took him away. "They had shaved his head and face and filled his veins with medicine so that he looked like a child again" (*IFC* 129). Embittered by what has happened to his family and community, he says to Rajan in a voice full of accusation:

When I look back I see you and others like you as the cause. We lived well, maybe too peacefully, before you all came with your ideas and your energies . . . You gave up everything to come to this land. We offered you what we had. But you all became greedy and wouldn't share. Saw no other world but the world of progress and money. And we had to make the sacrifices. (*IFC* 129)

Zul blames modernity and 'outsiders' like Rajan for bringing to the country alien energies and ideas that "can even destroy the tiger, the oldest symbol of our [Malay] civilization" (*IFC* 129). In his ravings, however, he never paused to consider if the cause of his misery might not be the world he denounces as corrupt but rather lies *within himself, in the Tiger qua Malay-Thing of his Heart* which serves as the aim and impetus of his moral activity. Zul never saw the internal contradictions in his conception of the Tiger. He claims to have made Mat see the Tiger before the latter migrated to the city where he lost his mind (129), but has he himself seen it? (Recall that neither Zul nor Rajan laid eyes on

the Tiger during their trip to Tigerland.) Also, he harps on at every opportunity about his Tiger and its pleasurable associations, making it clear to Rajan that he cannot not follow “the way of the tiger”<sup>54</sup> (Maniam 1997: 20) because the Tiger is the eternal truth of his being, the substance ‘in him more than himself’ which is so essential to his identity as a ‘real Malay’ that he would just ‘die’ if it is ever taken away from him. Yet, despite all the fuss about it, we never see the Tiger open its mouth to spell out what Zul must or must not do in order to live ‘the moral life’. We never see it instructing him to follow, defend and remain eternally faithful to the Malay race and ‘way of life’ championed by the earlier-mentioned Malay loyalists. (The careful reader will find that all the Tiger’s dictates come directly from Zul.) In fact, the Tiger never once appears *in persona*. No one (not the reader, Zul, Rajan or Muthu) ever comes face-to-face with it – which begs the question: *does it even exist?*

Certainly, as we have established, the Tiger exists as the Law of Zul’s Heart. However – and this is the crucial twist – it becomes the Law only if Zul represses into his unconscious the fact that the Tiger qua Law is “a capricious and arbitrary law, the law of the oracle, the law of signs in which the subject receives no guarantee from anywhere” (Lacan, in Žižek 2000d: 131). Contrary to Zul’s conscious belief, it is not always-already there, existing prior and external to the

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<sup>54</sup> As we discussed previously, “the way of the tiger” is defined by Maniam as “the continual and ritualistic immersion into the spirit of the land so as to be affirmed” (Maniam 1997: 20).

processes of knowledge, waiting for him to submit. Rather, it is his very submission to the Law that constitutes the Law as Law. As Župančič phrases it, “the Law is constituted only *in the act of the subject*” (emphasis added, 2000: 167). Such is the self-referential logic of ‘Law is Law’ which “articulates the vicious circle of its authority, the fact that the last foundation of the Law’s authority lies in its process of enunciation” (Žižek 1989: 37).

The secret truth of the Tiger qua Malay-Thing – its tautological nature, the fact that it is ‘alive’ only insofar as it is continually resuscitated by the believer’s passion – is the unthought that grounds Zul’s identity as a ‘real Malay’. It is the truth Zul cannot integrate into his living consciousness, for if he does, the symbolic universe he inhabits would collapse on account of its inherent inauthenticity. By disavowing the Tiger’s truth, he is condemned to cling to the land and relate to the world as if the land and the Malay race are the be-all and end-all. As well, he is condemned to defraud himself of the opportunity to be liberated-reconstituted as a *free subject*, as he who recognises himself as the absolute cause of the cause of himself, the One who precedes the ‘I’ qua ‘real Malay’.

## True Freedom

Zul's inability to surmount his Malay self and his persecution complex is not lost on Rajan who, having ruminated on Zul's irrationality and Mat's insanity, is now coming to realise that the "structures of our minds we see so clearly may, after all, be the first impressions of a truer consciousness" (136). Hitherto as self-certain as Zul, Rajan is beginning to grasp the perils of sense-certainty, how overconfidence "has a way of throwing limitations around life" (133).

Rajan does not dispute that Zul "meant well when he tried to show [him] the spirit of the Tiger" (*IFC* 144). The problem with Zul is that he has found "too much clarity". Without a second thought, he abandons himself to the immediacy of his emotional impulses, to his belief in his essential Malayness and the insular ways in which he must live his life. Till the end of *IFC*, he does not see that "when we act 'spontaneously' in the everyday meaning of the word, we are not free from but prisoners of our immediate nature" (Žižek 1993: 126). To act according to our 'deepest convictions' or 'authentic inclinations' is not to be free but to be subject to the laws of causality. To gain *true freedom*, we must act freely – not by doing whatever we want but by surmounting our unfreedom, our determination by and "dependence on the Other (such and such laws, inclinations, hidden motives . . .)" (Zupančič 2000: 28). As Rajan says towards the end of the novel:

one must be ready to let go even the most prized personal ideals and beliefs in order to come by an even more substantial grain of truth. The self, shaped by family, society, education and all that nourishes the ego, must be firmly put aside. One must escape from the prison of self-imposed or imposed upon order so that a new openness to life can be discovered. (*IFC* 167)

Through Zul, Rajan comes to recognise his own shortcomings too. He recognises that, even as he tenaciously clung to his individuality and self-independence, he had unwittingly allowed Zul to instil in him the belief that the Tiger may hold the key to the Other-Place where he would be 'truly at home'. He had taken the Tiger as a Transcendental Authority located outside himself, something to which Zul had more of a claim because of his 'blood connection' to the land. He had looked upon it as "a spiritual goal" (*IFC* 141) instead of what it really was: the obstacle preventing him from seeing that the Tiger was never 'out there' but always-already within himself. In other words, he had overlooked how *he was his own Tiger*, the presupposed messianic Other whose ontological guarantee he had sought for his existence:

No wonder it has taken me so long to discover its presence! . . . I see the true ramifications of that search for the tiger. I see now how I found a tiger for myself: in my attitude to my profession, the country and life. (*IFC* 143-4)



If we accept that Rajan finally recognises himself as the cause of his cause, what then is the significance? And how does it relate to Malaysia and the politics of nationhood? In order to flesh out the answer to these two questions, let us take a step back to retrace the path of Rajan's self-recognition.

After leaving Pak Zul's village, Rajan returns home but keeps to himself, not yet ready to go back to family life. He has yet to gain full access to the Tiger's secret at this point in the novel. As he says, "the borders of my consciousness are still not sufficiently destroyed for me to know the heart of that country" called life (*IFC* 137). Lying in bed one afternoon in a semi-conscious state, his mind returns to the jungle into which he had trekked with Zul a long time ago. This time, without Zul by his side to guide and impose on him, he traverses the fantasy jungle with an agility of his own. "There is no more an eye, neither Zul's nor the tiger's, watching" (*IFC* 138), he says. "I've suddenly become the eye itself. A lidless eye so that nothing can be blinked away; so that nothing can be distorted" (138). In Rajan's gaze, the fascinating Tiger first appears as a stain which condenses all that he "can't [won't?] understand" (140), something to which he presently has the urge to pay homage. To offer it sacrifice, he hunts and skewers a boar to death through the anus, decapitates it and spills its blood in a circle: "I've made my sacrifice and my spirit is light. I know the tiger won't harm me for I've left the boar's carcass in the centre of that holy circle. I am now part of the tiger and it contains everything that needs to be known" (*IFC* 142).

Immediately after the sacrifice, Rajan sees signs of the Tiger's absent presence everywhere: in a flower bud, the green of the trees, a fledgling tree, an anthill and in the very silence of the jungle. So absorbed with what he sees that he 'loses himself' in the act. That, it suddenly strikes him, is "the ultimate sacrifice needed to gain access to the tiger's presence: the giving up of the self" (*IFC* 142). If Rajan was against the idea the last time, he is convinced this time around that it is only rational for him to subordinate his will to the Tiger. With that 'realisation', his spirit becomes even lighter, as if a heavy burden has been removed. "There is no more necessity to understand not only myself but also all those shapes, objects and the network of creepers that seem to be always changing. There is no more need to worry about the force behind the changes. There is only the need to be subservient and to accept" (142-3).

Rajan is now burning with the desire to be fully released from the burden of thinking and being responsible for himself. He feels his skin peeling and his flesh "merging with the flesh of another, the other" (143). The merging process has begun but something is blocking the way. A voice from within Rajan is protesting, piping up "like the voice of my childhood when innocent and therefore made bold, I accepted nothing, submitted to nothing. Rajan is torn "between wanting to be merged with the tiger and the need to be *really free*" (emphasis added, 143). "The idea that nothing of me [his will to self-determination, not his Indianness] will ever remain appals me." Finally, he decides that he cannot and

will not give up his will to self-determination. With that decision, the vision vanishes and Rajan starts to feel, for the first time in months, the trickle of vitality returning to his body and mind.

## Noir Malaysia

Rajan has passed the trial of fire, “freed [his] mind from all kinds of suppressions and repressions” (*IFC* 145) and gained access to the Tiger’s truth. But his journey is not yet concluded. “Just when I thought I had reached some sense of peace and clarity, I find odd things happening . . . Strange interferences – that’s all I can call them at the moment – are coming into my sleep.” These “strange interferences” centre on a dark microcosm of Malaysia, a settlement not unlike other settlements in the country. Overcast with the shadows of dark conspiracy, it is home to citizens who live in trepidation of the country’s leader whose absent presence is all-pervasive:

We, the ordinary citizens, are somehow aware of the leader’s presence all the time.

Any man suspected even of thinking of subverting the leader’s leadership is taken away and has things done to him. When the man returns, he is so docile even Mani the goat has more spirit. But quite often things don’t get that far. There are check systems already operating at lower, ordinary levels.

These watch-dog institutions are not that obvious to the ordinary eye. They work through existing customs and rituals practised by the various communities. (*IFC* 146)

The “customs and rituals” Rajan refers to involve some form of sacrifice. Flowers, food and slaughtered animals are offered to deities, gods and the dead. They are usually found at graveyards, temples and shrines beside bends in the road. Offerings – “the most colourful and abundant” (*IFC* 147) – are also made to men occupying high positions of power, usually complemented by the best caterers, a live band and a cultural dance performance. Lastly, there are what Rajan calls “cultural sacrifices”, i.e. sacrifices that “weld us together in obedience to the ruling regime” (*IFC* 147). Members of the community who partake in cultural sacrifices may slaughter a buffalo, goat or pig. They may do so for a variety of reasons: for the enjoyment of it, as a way of expressing allegiance to their community and so on. At that level, cultural sacrifices are neither wrong nor harmful. They only become insidious when we believe “our culture is not whatever beliefs and practices we actually happen to have but is instead the beliefs and practices that should properly go with the sort of people we happen to be” (Walter Benn Michaels, in Žižek 1997b: 26).

Culture is today’s politically-correct way of continuing racial thought. It becomes race the moment we take what we do (our custom and rituals) as something we *should* do because of who we are ‘deep inside’, our race qua

fantasmatic Thing in us that makes us 'us'. As Walter Benn Michaels explains, "it is only the appeal to race that makes culture an object of affect and that gives notions like losing our culture, preserving it, stealing someone else's culture, restoring people's culture to them, and so on, their pathos" (Žižek 1997b: 26). We see this clearly demonstrated in *IFC* by the inhabitants of Rajan's dark world, including Ramasamy, Jimmy Kok and Zulkifli (respectively representing the insular Indian, Chinese and Malay).<sup>55</sup> Along with a host of hostile, faceless figures, they pressure Rajan to recant his 'heretical' belief in self-determination and to embrace racial determination:

"Why are you like this?" Ramasamy says. "You're one of us and yet you're not one of us."

"Can't a man be just himself?"

"When you were born did your mother leave you naked?" he asks and when I don't answer he says "She wrapped you up in the clothes of our [Indian] culture. See how it has fed you and strengthened you. Gave you mind and spirit."

"I can find them by myself," I say and he laughs.

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<sup>55</sup> The role Ramasamy and Jimmy play in the dream sequence is different from their role in the demolition scene we discussed earlier in this chapter. The inconsistency is strategic in that Ramasamy and Jimmy are not, like Rajan and Zul, full-fledged characters but multipurpose caricatures Maniam uses to convey different messages at different points of the novel.



"You've to fight everything our culture gave us," he says. (*IFC* 155)

From behind the businessman's mask, Jimmy Kok too tries to steer Rajan back on to the accepted path, but Rajan remains as headstrong as before. Instead of unconditionally accepting the nature of things as defined by Jimmy, he finds holes in it:

"You say things too openly," [Jimmy] says. "You must hide your real self. Otherwise you'll be in danger."

If I'm not myself I'll be in danger" I say.

"See what I mean?" he says. "There are eyes and ears everywhere."

"Why are they everywhere?" I ask.

"We live by rules here," he says. "They can't be broken. New ones can't be made until everyone agrees."

"If everyone agrees how will the new be found?"

"This is an old story," Jimmy Kok says. "There can be no new rules."

"So sacrifices must be made?"

“We’ve been friends for a long time,” he says. “This is the only way I can help you. By giving you advice. Play the game.”

“If the game is bad?”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” (*IFC* 156)

Zul conducts himself no differently from Ramasamy and Jimmy in the dream sequence. Even though he has overcome his sorrow for his son, he has yet to emerge from “the darkness of the limited mind” (*IFC* 153). To him race is still everything. True to character, he chastises Rajan – this time for not showing due respect for the unique Thing of the Other. He is saddened that Rajan does not appreciate the Other’s cultural domain as a sacrosanct domain that outsiders must never transgress. Until the end, he neither sees nor appears to care that the beliefs he champions are “building up walls” and “preventing us from knowing each other, knowing ourselves” (157). He does not see that when communities keep to themselves and respect from afar other communities’ enjoyment of their own Thing, they are – *by that very act* – creating “many countries inside that one country” (116). Performatively they ensure that *Bangsa Malaysia* will always remain a pipe dream and that Malaysia will always be racially divided.

What we have just delineated above is the *effect* of pragmatic tolerance (discussed earlier with regard to *HTT*). Pragmatic tolerance causes what it says

Malaysia can never achieve precisely by presupposing that the various races in the country are as different from each other as chalk and cheese. It turns on the assumption that given the insurmountable differences between the races, superficial togetherness is the best that the country can hope for, and that the best way to realise this is to appeal to the so-called universal values, e.g. "the love for peace", "economic and materialistic security and success, the desire for relatively high educational achievements" (Maniam 1997: 20). Pragmatic tolerance does not see that "the common ground that allows cultures to talk to each other, to exchange messages, is not some presupposed set of universal values, etc., but rather its opposite, some shared *deadlock*". It does not see that cultures only truly communicate when they "recognise in each other a different answer to the same fundamental "antagonism," deadlock, point of failure" (Žižek 1993: 31).

Members of all cultural communities are everywhere the same insofar as they share the same ontological wound, that is, insofar as they are, as subjects, always-already internally antagonised, blocked from within from achieving full identity-with-themselves. To occult the traumatic emptiness at the heart of their subjectivity, "the castration that is the inheritance of every human subject" (Ragland 1996: 134), they have but language to spin out soothing fictions about how their cultural universe was once complete and how the Enemy is responsible for its present incompleteness. They create customs and habits they call culture in order to assure themselves that 'everything will be OK' if they never stop

practising what they have created. Until they traverse their fantasy, they will not see that culture is not, as we explained in Chapter 6, the truth of one's being but the effect of its absence, a genealogy of failures to capture one's essence which lies beyond the wall of language. Until then, they will not see that yes, we lose a few feathers by letting our illusions of knowing fall, by admitting that what is most precious to us is in the last instance a gift of shit. We lose "our pride, the comfort of the familiar, and our symptoms. What do we have to gain? Some space for freedom to breathe deeply, some chance to change, to live, love, laugh. And maybe the chance to live beyond the first death of alienation from "within," which Lacan placed before the second animal death, or mortal one" (Ragland 1996: 146).

Rajan, unlike Muthu in *HTT*, gains the chance to live beyond the first death of alienation. But he is the odd man out, at least in his nightmare-world which thinly disguises contemporary Malaysia. There, as in Malaysia, non-compliance with the social dogma invites disciplinary action from the government.<sup>56</sup> For being a "deviant" (*IFC* 158) and for not "spreading and upholding the administration's policies" (148), Rajan has to be punished, just as

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<sup>56</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) is routinely used by the ruling regime to crack down on dissent and opposition. In the year 2001, for instance, 2520 people were detained under the various detention-without-trial laws. Among those detained were ten key leaders from Keadilan (the National Justice Party) and Suaram (a human rights group), including Tian Chua (Keadilan vice-president). See Suaram's Executive Summary of Malaysian Civil and Political Rights 2001 at [http://www.suaram.org/hr\\_summary\\_2001.htm](http://www.suaram.org/hr_summary_2001.htm)

Mani the recalcitrant goat in the novel is ritually slaughtered for having “the courage to show his feelings so openly” (147).

Mani is interestingly similar to Rajan in spirit. He “isn’t like the other goats, cowed” (*IFC* 147). His eyes have an indeterminate quality about them; it is as if they were the apertures of “a deeper awareness” (14). “He is almost human in the way he looks at you; almost human in the way he protects his freedom. He doesn’t allow anyone to put the rope around his neck” (147). As if to express what he thinks of the ruling regime, Mani farts raucously while a politician is half-way through pontificating “about how the administration has only the welfare of the people at heart” (149). When the politician continues with his praise of the administration’s far-sightedness, Mani uncouthly fills the air with the stink of a goat’s pellet-dung and urine. He gets away with it but is soon caught and ritually prepared for castration before the presiding politician. “Watch this carefully . . . He has to be taught a lesson” (154), the executioner says to the crowd before pulling out a curved knife and makes an incision which travels from Mani’s penis sheath to the scrotum. The executioner then slices downwards until he reaches Mani’s throat. Mani stays proudly silent and indifferent to pain, which infuriates his executioner into discarding his professionalism and to savagely hack at Mani’s throat. Mani is then skinned and dismembered before the crowd rushes forward to carry away this or that piece of him, all looking in the politician’s direction with “devotional gratitude” (155).



After Mani comes Rajan's turn to be neutered in the interest of the nation. Still in the nightmare sequence, a strange machine with many instruments descends on Rajan to "get at the root of [his] uselessness" and make him "one of us": "I feel suction-like pads on my head, face, chest, thighs and feet. Then the machine pauses as if it has found the source of my non-conformity. There is a sharp pain as a clamp is riveted to my temples; a sharper pain when a casing is fitted to my testicles and penis" (*IFC* 158). Rajan struggles and lashes out until he is woken from his nightmare by his wife who rushes into the room when she hears him screaming.

### **Arriving . . .**

Although Rajan gained access to the truth of his being before the strange interferences began, it is only now – after the nightmare – that he wakes up as a different person, as someone perceptibly more 'at home' with himself: "I've become a dreamer since I returned. No, not in the escapist sense. All I want to see is life unfold itself in its entirety" (*IFC* 171). This is not to suggest that Rajan has 'arrived' and his life will thenceforth be free from strife. At the point when the novel concludes, he still has his wife, Santhi, to reconcile with after years of having reduced her to the level of object. And he has his children, Ravi and Sivam, to protect from the curse of the eternal return which he can already see dancing in their eyes.

Rajan feels responsible for having “maimed” (189) the older boy, Ravi who is the more thoughtful and determined: “I saw in him a younger version of what I had been and turned away in disgust” (188-9). Sivam, the younger boy is not as set in his ways. He still has some fluidity of accommodation in his personality. But already Rajan has seen in his eyes “the flicker of light that had played in Mani’s eyes” (189). Disconcerted, he asks his wife if he had somehow, by his actions or inactions, “turned them away from being themselves” (189). Had he somehow altered their destiny the way that the woman from his childhood altered her child’s destiny? Rajan recalls how the woman, once the beauty of the rubber estate and a model Hindu wife, gradually lost her youthfulness and turned bitter from the abuse she suffered in the hands of her husband. In a powerful moment in the novel, she is seen sitting in the doorway of her house, hugging her pregnancy and saying:

Little one, you about to be born, listen. You came into my womb violently. I didn’t want you. The man put you there while smelling of drink and vomit. Other, worse things are smelling inside him. He has made me smell too. When you come at last into this world, you won’t be drinking milk from my breasts. You’ll be drinking bitterness, hatred, suffering. You can stop the suffering if you try. You must get the strength for that from the little milk you can receive from my breasts. If it’s not the custom for a son to beat his father, you must break that custom. You must break his head and spill his blood. There won’t be any brains to spill. So, son, you must be stronger than your brothers and sisters . . . You must be

hard. Hard like a twisted metal that can't be twisted any more.  
(*IFC* 183-4)

The last Rajan saw of the family before he left the estate many years ago, the child was already showing signs of becoming his mother's desire. There wasn't anything the child didn't leave ravaged: plants, windows, clothes, bicycles. "He was defiant for the sake of defiance. His mother had been successful in passing this spirit to him while he was still inside her" (*IFC* 184).

*IFC* closes on a disconcerting note without confirming or dismissing what Rajan fears might be history repeating itself. It leaves the reader to ponder if every generation does not inherit the ring of the eternal return which it must break in order to come into freedom. The closing is quintessentially Maniam. Victory is never complete in Maniam's universe. We need only recall how, although Ravi returns to himself in *TR*, his triumph is sapped by his father's suicide. Maniam explains the logic behind his work:

I don't think many of my characters reach what you call a full sense of achievement at all, or a sense of completeness or a sense of fullness; they are always somewhere progressing towards it but they don't quite get there and I think that progressing towards it would define what I believe is humanity always progressing in that sense towards a completer image of itself. You don't quite get

there because if you get there then you would all be dead, reaching a point and not going forward in this field. (Greet 1991: 7)

Maniam's logic of non-arrival applies not just to his fictional characters but also, ultimately, to Malaysia and its peoples. Maniam says that his greatest fear for the Malaysian society "is that they want to be stable and enjoy the pleasures" (Lim 1999a). He recognises that Malaysians have generally come to accept and even appreciate authoritarian rule, norms and institutions. They are grateful for the government-promoted 'golden formula' (obedience to the government, pragmatic tolerance, Malay supremacy, eternal Malay hegemony) which allows them to live in comfort, work and earn a good living from their toil. Some might disagree with the government's 'divide the races and rule' policies, or the way it plugs for the Malay race to be put on "a very high pedestal" (Maniam, in Tan 1998: Appendix 1, p. 7). Rarely, however, do they have the will or the courage to not "play the game" (*IFC* 156). This could be due to a variety of reasons: fear of being taken away and have things done to them by the representatives of the "watch-dog institutions" (146), fear of accidentally destroying "the society we've so carefully built" (158), and failure to see that the alternative to the 'golden formula' is not anarchy, as the government would have them believe. No doubt, one can argue that the Malaysian general public may well have been conditioned to fear and regard the government as the end-point of knowledge and the final authority on life. But as Maniam poses, "Does that mean

conditioning is always one-hundred percent effective? Need it be effective, unless you surrender to it?" (Lim 1999a)

Rajan is Maniam's proof that one can *not* surrender one's will to self-determination to the government, however paternalistic it may be as the agent of Law. Against Sarvan who rather cynically interprets the protagonist as trying to "pass off his essential powerlessness as virtuous restraint and democratic accommodation" (Sarvan 1996: 72), we argue that Rajan, like Mani, not only agentively acts the way he believes, he even pays a price for it. For refusing to say that the Emperor is not a naked usurper of power, he is singled out for castration.

At the end of *IFC*, Rajan emerges as an unlikely hero, a "political strong poet" (Laclau), a "subject of drive" (Lacan), a "god" (Okri) or what Maniam calls "the universal man" (1996: xii) and "the new diasporic man" (1997: 23). Rajan belongs to a "new diaspora" in Malaysia, a fragmented and dispersed community of men and women from all backgrounds, all of whom are concerned with the quality of thought and life that can be made available to the Malaysian populace. "Their approach to individual, historical and socio-cultural developments is markedly different from that of the cultural loyalist; they will not subscribe to the concept of pragmatic tolerance discussed earlier" (1997: 23: 22). They do not, like the cultural loyalist who follows the way of the Tiger, "seek to be reassured by an imagined cultural stability." They recognise that "man has been artificially



categorised into a monocultural, ethnic and political being when multiplicity is his true nature” (1997: 23: 23). Reading Maniam through Lacan, we may say that they fully assume the uttermost contingency of their being. They recognise that “no-one arrives; there is no platform where one can stand permanently.” Instead of lamenting their fate and blaming the Enemy, they find happiness “in being in a state of always arriving rather than having arrived” (Maniam, in Wilson 1993: 22). The new diaspora seeks to influence through “the more persuasive imaging of a vision in the present” (Maniam 1997: 22). But will it succeed in hegemonising its vision? Its status as a minority without power seems to work against it. But as Martin Tyrell optimistically points out, at the bottom of any process of social influence there is always a relatively small social group, and all social influence is ultimately a process of minority influence (1996: 238). Whatever the odds, the new diaspora’s success is absolutely necessary if Malaysia is to live up to its radical possibilities.

# CONCLUSION

Perhaps our very physical survival hinges on our ability to consummate the act of assuming fully the “nonexistence of the Other”, of *tarrying with the negative*. (Žižek 1993: 237)

## A Way of Being Free

If there is a vital lesson to be learned from our discussion on Okri and Maniam, it is that the subject of desire is not only much more unfree than he believes, he is also much freer than he knows. Where the subject believes himself free, Lacan insists on a causal order beyond his control. But where the subject becomes aware of his dependence on the Other (such and such Law, pathological motives, . . . ) and is ready to give it up, Lacan “indicates a ‘crack’ in the Other, a crack in which he situates the autonomy and freedom of the subject” (Zupančič 2000: 28). We have seen this logic of freedom expressed in different ways by different characters throughout our discussion. In Okri, we saw how because the nation-peoples berated by Dad for their sheep-like philosophy volitionally *choose* the Bad (by tolerating tyranny and allowing themselves to be lured into supporting corrupt politicians and receiving crumbs of reward for their patronage) over the Worse (the undecideable which leads to either total annihilation or greater freedom), they

condemn themselves to a life of unfreedom. By contrast, Azaro's father, Dad, fully assumes the Worse. Realising that there is 'no gain without pain', he readily risks it all, cuts himself loose from the things through which corrupt politicians try to keep him in check: his personal well-being and even his life. In doing so, Dad creates a space for himself and others to redream the abiku nation and make the dream real. By his actions, Dad demonstrates that we are free whether we want to be or not, free in both freedom and unfreedom, free in good and in evil, and free even when we follow nothing but the trajectory of natural necessity (Zupančič 2000: 39).

In Maniam, the logic of freedom is articulated in the movement of Ravi's and Rajan's consciousness towards self-superecession, in their passage from desire to drive and ultimate recognition of the fact that they had, despite their cocksureness in the independence of their will, acted under the shadow of the Other. Ravi and Rajan had unconsciously subordinated themselves to their libidinal Thing. They had committed the ethical crime of living in a deficit of existence. However, after a lifetime of emptiness and unhappiness, they finally recognise their complicity in the creation and perpetuation of their ontological dilemma. They recognise themselves as their own making, the absolute cause of the cause of their actions. No longer hiding behind the Law, they recognise that the Law is the necessary Law of their Heart only insofar as they personally institute it as such. Because Ravi and Rajan fully assume the contingency of their

subjectivity, they get the chance to live beyond the first death of alienation from within. By contrast, Zul the 'real Malay' never accepts that he is the Tiger he seeks, the One who chooses the Law that chooses him. He rejects the power of choice and is condemned to live in perpetual dread of the Enemy stealing from him the freedom he himself had rejected. He tries to impose unfreedom upon 'outsiders' living in the land he calls his, and ends up holding himself and the nation back from discovering "wider and more inclusive centres for the understanding and assimilation of larger areas of life" (Maniam 1994a: 10).

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, and with the world being rushed by leaders of Mahathir's ilk into a final showdown between the east and the west, Islam and Christianity, it has become all the more urgent for cultures everywhere to come into self-knowledge, to traverse the fantasy in such a way as to be free from the illusion that by denouncing and defeating the Enemy, the past and all that they value as 'heritage' will be redeemed, dignity will be restored, and society will finally return to a state of Edenic fullness. Cultures need to see that "true loyalty to a tradition lies in recognising in the past its transient and historical character, its difference with the present (a difference that involves continuities and discontinuities at the same time), and not in transforming the past into a model and an origin to which one tries to reduce the present through more and more absurd and less credible . . . manipulations" (Laclau 1990: 193-4). Cultures need to understand that the proper

response to events following September 11 is not to withdraw into their blameless selves like a sensitive plant and denounce the world as wicked. The proper response should be the inverse, that is, for cultures to come out from their cocoons long enough to see that, if the world is to have a chance at all, each and every culture must refuse to give its own organisation, values and social order the status of *fundamentum inconcussum* (Laclau 1990: 187).

## **Overcoming Passions**

At the time of writing this, two of eleven states in Malaysia have controversially enacted the strict Islamic-Sharia Law as state Law. The Law presently applies only to Muslims (Malays by default) but will be imposed on non-Muslims (non-Malays) in the future “when every citizen understands them”, says Abdul Hadi Awang (president of PAS, the Islamic fundamentalist party which introduced the legislation) (Lim 2002a). The marriage of state and religion has far-reaching consequences, for Hudud and Qisas (the newly-introduced Islamic-Sharia religious code) cover all aspects of living. Among other things, the Law bars non-Muslims from having any policy-making role in government. It also empowers religious authorities to amputate the limbs of convicted thieves, behead murderers, and stone adulterers and homosexuals to death.



The stand taken by Barisan Nasional (the ruling coalition party) has been ambivalent at best. Its leader, Mahathir Mohamad, cannot be said to be happy with PAS' increasing popularity among Malay-Muslims in the country. But that does not mean he opposes the idea of an Islamic state. As we saw Chapter 2, as far as Mahathir is concerned, Malaysia is already an Islamic nation even though the constitution defines the country as secular. Neither does he appear to be overly concerned about the fate of *dhimmis* ('non-Muslims') who, already facing racial discrimination, now have to struggle against the imposition of Islamist values on their lives. To quote an amazing statement Mahathir made on the brewing political crisis: "minority groups have no mandate to determine or question whether Malaysia is an Islamic country or otherwise" (Liu 2002).

Notwithstanding, PAS' move has been publicly condemned as retrogressive by concerned non-governmental organisations and right-minded sections of the Malaysian society. "It reflects the narrow-mindedness and lack of understanding of modern issues by the leaders", says Maria Chin Abdullah, the executive director of a women's group. DAP national chairman, Lim Kit Siang, is equally emphatic: "We oppose any theocratic state or any laws based on religion not just because it is insensitive to the multi-religious and multi-racial society but also because it is incompatible with the principles of democracy, human rights, justice and freedom" (Lim 2002a).

Responding to criticisms of his Islamist utopia, Hadi Awang says that the public has paid too much attention to the Law's punitive aspects, so much so that its "beauty" has been obscured (Lim 2002c). The legislation, he say, signals the dawn of a post-political era. It will ensure a safe, peaceful, crime-free and fully-constituted society, as exemplified by countries like Saudi Arabia and Sudan which have successfully implemented Islamic Law. What Hadi Awang does not mention is that Saudi Arabia has one of the worst human rights records in history. According to Amnesty International, "secrecy and fear permeate every aspect of the state structure in Saudi Arabia. There are no political parties, no elections, no independent legislature, no trade unions, no Bar Association, no independent judiciary, no elections, no independent human rights organizations" (Lim 2002b; see also Amnesty International 2002a). The situation in Sudan is even worse. Mohamed al-Amin Khalifa, a leading northern Islamist, asserts that "Sharia leads to low crime, low prostitution, low numbers of AIDS cases, and a sense of tranquillity. It is a deterrent" (Hammond 2002). In reality, Sharia has, since its introduction in Sudan by former ruler Jaafar Nimeiri roughly twenty years ago, bitterly divided the war-torn country between the Islamist north and the animist and Christian south. The conflict is further complicated by issues such as oil and ethnicity.

It is true that, in this post September 11 world, it has become "very fashionable to present the Muslims as particularly susceptible to being crazy or

blowing themselves up” (Feldner 2001). In the face of mounting hysteria, one must be careful not to defame Islam as the “most stupid” of all monotheistic religions, as have Michel Houellebecq, a well-known writer in France who was recently charged in court (but subsequently acquitted) for allegedly inciting religious hatred against Muslims. Likewise, one should not, when opposing the logic of Malay supremacy and the unconstitutional Islamisation of Malaysia, follow in the footsteps of Houellebecq. One should instead endeavour to show, as we have in this thesis, that the political desire of the likes of Hadi Awang and Malay-centric Malays is not only unethical in the Lacanian sense of the term, but also fatal.

Nigeria, which has had a headstart in implementing Sharia, provides a good example of what might be in store for Malaysia should it continue in its present path. Since the year 2000, twelve of thirty six states in Nigeria have introduced the Sharia penal legislation, a move denounced as unconstitutional by Nigerians who vehemently oppose it. (Nigeria’s constitution requires the separation of state and religion. It guarantees freedom of religion to individuals but denies it to the states (Emeagwali 2000).) Since the introduction of the Law, lashings for infractions such as drinking and disturbing the public peace have been doled out on a daily basis in the Sharia states (see Astill 2002; Faris 2002). Many have had their limbs amputated and at least two women have been sentenced to death by stoning for having a baby out of wedlock. One of them is

Amina Lawal, a 30 year-old woman whose death sentence has outraged civil society in and outside of Nigeria.

Amina Lawal's sentence has even prompted Soyinka to go on radio to berate the states for "putting us through this very sadistic charade in which human beings are being made the mere game of politics in a very traumatic way" (Efeizomor 2002). Soyinka insists that Sharia is "a pure political ploy", an "attempt to create a crisis – a pure political crisis – because of disgruntlement with the current government. There is nothing really religious about it. I mean, what excuse do these people – who are just another group within a multi-religious plurality – what excuse do they have?" Soyinka's viewpoint is entirely justified if we consider the widespread religious violence the Sharia issue has touched off. One of the worst carnage and devastation was inflicted in Kaduna in the year 2000, where more than two thousand people were reported to have been killed. In his speech following the incident, President Olusegu Obasanjo says:

I could not believe that Nigerians were capable of such barbarism against one another. But what I saw there was perhaps even more gruesome in detail . . . The devastation was so massive, it seemed as though Kaduna had overnight been turned into a battlefield . . . All so suddenly, people who had been their neighbours for decades turned on them, and massacred them. And yet, those who were responsible for these murders claim that they were acting in defence of faith or religion . . . When all the statistics of the

devastation in Kaduna, Kachia, Aba and Umuahia are recorded, we will find, I am sad to say, that this has been the worst incident of blood-letting that this country has witnessed since the Civil War. (Obasanjo 2000)

Much has been said about the Sharia issue in Nigeria. It has been said, for instance, that the imposition of Sharia leaves Nigeria “with its left foot in the Stone Age and its right foot in the Information age” (Emeagwali 2000). It has been said that Sharia allows Muslim leaders to shift the blame of evil to Christians, capitalism and adulterous women. It has also been said that the problems faced by the Muslim North “cannot be solved by seeking divine guidance or fighting Christians” and that the North should instead “declare a *jihad* [holy war] against illiteracy, overpopulation and AIDS which is spreading like wildfire in Nigeria” (Emeagwali 2000). But what do we say to someone like Abdul Majeed, a primary school teacher in Shuwarin (a remote village in northern Nigeria) who believes that “with Sharia it is going to be a very good, decent society, with no harlots or drunkards . . . All those unwanted customs that are not in our blood, are going to go away” (Phillips 2000)? Is Abdul Majeed accountable for the installation of the Islamist Thing at the centre of his world of desires? Is he responsible for the pleasure and pain, and the good and bad he derives from being unquestioningly faithful to it? Is he an autonomous individual who volitionally chooses his own Absolute and therefore his destiny, or is he merely a simple



villager who knows not what he does? Our short answer is yes, he is fully responsible for his relationship to his Thing, and our long answer is this thesis.

# APPENDIX 1

## Synopsis of K.S. Maniam's Unpublished Novel *Delayed Passage*

Dr. Kumar retires, in the mid-nineties, from the Social Anthropology Department of a local university, disappointed he could not assimilate into Malay culture and society. Resolved, therefore, to have nothing to do with the world for the rest of his life, he cocoons himself within a precarious tranquillity. But this is soon chiselled away by his attraction to his widowed and young daughter-in-law, Sumathi.

She has come to his house with the vague idea of tracking down his son's spirit, appeasing it, and so release herself not so much from the grief as the guilt she feels over his death. Kumar agrees to help her in the bizarre quest, for the inexplicable and youthful fascination he develops for her sensual presence has somehow to be satisfied. He listens to her self-exploratory stories, and reconstructs, with voyeuristic eagerness, when he is alone, her married life with his son.

When he finds and shows her a crucial letter from his son, to recreate for her his voice, Kumar's mask of aloofness and moral imperturbability comes tumbling down. Sumathi too, subconsciously realizes she has inherited the immorality of her adoptive mother. Caught now within a trance-like urgency, she sees in him his son, and he, far gone into that trance of sensual attraction, borrows his dead son's brooding air and gestures, and ceasing to be the father, becomes the son. On the verge of satisfying that incestuous impulse, he pulls away from her, becoming aware, unexpectedly, of a mythical innocence flooding upon him.

He now enters the past he has avoided in an attempt to track to the source this mythical innocence, which he senses is closely tied to his regression and his straying the true path of self-fulfilment. He sees it is his empty shell of a father, a victim of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, that drives him towards an early sense of himself. This is to be like Faizal, his Malay classmate, who is not only sensuous himself but also enjoys a sensuous relationship with the land.

Kumar spends as much time as he can with Faizal, away from his poverty-stricken family living in depressing rubber estate; he allows Faizal to initiate him, instinctively, into the pulse and seasons of the land, climaxing in a ritual immersion in the river, from which he emerges feeling he has somehow caught a glimpse into his essential self, and can now confront the shrieking wilderness lies ahead of him.

All this changes when he meets Hashim at the teacher training college he and Faizal attend several years later. Hashim fuels Kumar's latent imagination with his seductive interpretation of the country's history, and convinces him that there is a deeper way to belong to the land. The spell he casts wears off when they are posted to their old school; they turn to the practicalities of getting on with their lives. They marry, Faizal a Malay girl his mother finds to match his boisterous nature; and Kumar, reminded of the empty boldness of some of the college women, the brooding and rebellious Devi, from a family ruled by the mother's sense of Hindu tradition.

It is about this time that Kumar gets a further glimpse of himself, Faizal and Devi, as coming from that mythical source, untouched by intellectual, cultural or political corruptions of the self. However, Kumar doesn't accept this abstract sense of the self; he doesn't want to drift away into some void, as his father had done.

When Hashim reappears in his life, Kumar sees him as an Odyssean cultural hero, and is eager to fashion himself after this image. But Hashim, influenced by the 1969 May racial riots, has already discarded his liberal humanist approach for an anti-colonial and more narrowly nationalistic one. Kumar too, coming from immigrant stock, sees the only way to become Malaysian is to belong as closely to the land as a Malay does; consequently, when

he goes to study in the university he becomes physically and emotionally distanced from his family. Devi withdraws into a marbled remoteness, which he fears but explains away as a relapse into an atavistic version of the Hindu woman.

After the family shifts to Kuala Lumpur, Devi comes out of her withdrawal to remind him, through the house-blessing rituals, of his cultural origins. He himself organizes a house-warming party during which Azman, a wayang kulit puppeteer, deeply touches him, and a racially mixed audience, with a *Malayised* version of the *Ramayana* episode of Sita entering the flames to prove her purity. But Kumar ignores the wider cultural implications of these occasions, and goes the other way: he surrenders to the process Hashim has indirectly designed for his assimilation into Malay culture.

This takes place in Badnock estate, where Kumar meets Ramasamy, a man renowned for living within a deep silence. Kumar sees this as a withdrawal into Indianness, and he helps Hashim's henchmen flush out this cultural nostalgia in Ramasamy and its suspected residue in himself. When Kumar returns to his family, he returns as one who has made a successful cultural cross-over.

The distance between himself and his family widens: Devi withdraws into her marbled remoteness; his son, Surin, who had rebelled earlier, now turns away from him; his elder daughter, Sunita, tries to bring him to his senses and, failing,



marries Sunder, a bank clerk, and goes away from the family; his other daughter, Janaki, leaves for America to make a life for herself. From that time onwards, he and his wife lead separate lives, completely removed from each other by an irrevocable silence.

His situation in the university is no better. Hashim feels he has created Kumar too much in his own likeness, and, by extension, fears a cultural displacement if the process of assimilation is allowed to continue. This fear transmutes itself into self-assertion and a greed for power. He enjoys having Kumar at his beck and call, influencing others to keep away from him, and, finally, turning him into a reflector of his power. Kumar sees that his dependence on others for a life has brought him close to being, ironically, the empty shell of a man his father had been.

Coming out of these recollections, Kumar realizes he has to confront that marbled remoteness from which he turned away a long time ago. He discovers it is not only an inborn endurance in women, but also a deep source of strength and openness in all individuals. And to acquire that inner and inventive sombreness one has to tread the path of humility. He goes, therefore, to pay his daughter, Sunita, that long overdue visit. He is received with a cruel coldness, but he feels he is prepared to face whatever humiliation his wife and daughters may have in store for him.

This happens at a special family reunion dinner, when they turn into the priestesses of a necessary and cathartic ritual. By enduring the humiliation, he buries his past, distorted self and regains his place in the family, and a sense of balance. His memory begins to filter back, and with it his original and more encompassing imagination.

He now sees that everything is integrally connected, and though he has been forced to retire ignobly from the university, he helps a Malay student research for his PhD; he picks up from where left off, his relationship with Faizal; and he insists that Hashim approach the history of multicultural Malaysia more objectively. But Hashim looks at him from behind the smooth face of a self-assured, cultural arrogance.

Nagged by the doubt that his may only be a subjective experience, he sets out to find out if this racial and cultural exclusiveness has taken wider root. While this is a walk through a busy Kuala Lumpur street, it also an Odyssean spiritual undertaking. Leafing symbolically through the history of the country, he discovers that there is no common cultural memory, and that the main culture has locked itself up behind the inaccessible and smooth face of self-absorption.

Taking a symbolic bus ride towards the future, he realizes he has become a womb-like intelligence, waiting for the burst of light to come through the membranous mists of another awakening.

## APPENDIX 2

### Synopsis of K.S. Maniam's Forthcoming Novel *Between Lives*

Sumitra, a social worker, sent to persuade the old woman, Sellamma, to be relocated to a welfare home, finds her stubbornly refusing to leave her land. Sumitra persists, until Sellamma lets her into her memories, and treats her as her long-lost elder sister. By playing along, Sumitra hopes to find that one weakness that will help her dislodge Sellamma from her memories, and from her land. Instead she finds herself, affected by Sellamma's past and her personality, entering her own past and the nooks and crannies of her family and society. She discovers that she only has pretended to have an identity, and, after Sellamma's death, refuses, with the support of Christina and Aishah, to give up the land Sellamma bequeaths her.

Sumitra, like Christina and Aishah, all between twenty-six to twenty-eight, has been dubiously trained for the Social Reconstruction Department (SRD). The recently set up, nation-wide SRD hopes to identify and root out those social ills that hinder the multiracial society from becoming really integrated. Sumitra takes

pride in belonging to this reformist institution, as she does in her inner detachment that she has used, so far, to make a success of her career.

But it doesn't help her when she comes face-to-face with Sellamma. Sumitra tries to impersonate her sister, getting a sample of her voice from Sellamma, and so get into her memories or, as she thinks, her delusions. But Sellamma only withdraws into the stillness from which, according to her, everything comes, and into which everything disappears. Not to be thwarted from her purpose, Sumitra sits at the edge of Sellamma's consciousness, and her silence, until she herself becomes a patient and empty stillness. Sellamma finally looks at her, as if through her memory-eyes, and sees her as her long-lost sister, Anjalai.

Sellamma puts Sumitra through various rituals: immersion in a nearby river and a remembrance ramble through the ruined houses of the settlement, her land and house, and, finally, through a mesmerizing puja. Then she recreates her memories, taking on the voices of her family members, and compels Sumitra, through accusations and affectionate appeals, into becoming her Anjalai-Akka. Sumitra tries not to be overwhelmed.

That's when she starts the alternative file, not so much to help her write that all-important report for the Department Head (DH), as to retain her inner



detachment. She deceives herself by finding specious reasons for Sellamma's attachment to the land. She also tries to fall back into her gestural life, playing word games with Christina, and reading her favourite magazine. When these don't help, she reassures herself by re-immersing herself in her own rituals: wresting a specious philosophy out of the brooding hills behind Charlie Wong's Club, and drawing attention to herself through her flamboyant, sensuous swimming in the Club's lagoon.

As she progresses into Sellamma's case, she rouses suspicions in her colleagues and family. Christina, her colleague and close friend, fears that a deeper involvement with Sellamma will make Sumitra discover that the SRD is a fake institution, and so jeopardize their careers. Aishah, a Malay, and her other perceptive colleague, suspects Sumitra of indulging in cultural nostalgia. Her mother fears that her straying from a normal work life will be taken by her husband and mother-in-law as inherited from her own, earlier waywardness.

Sumitra finds herself becoming drained, and sees a thin line of separation between herself and the Department. But she still doesn't look at herself closely, even though her other subject, Hisham, slowly going out of his mind, tells her point-blank that she is a phony.

She makes a final attempt to exorcise Sellamma's memories from her. She repeats the trip Sellamma made with Anjalai-Akka into the jungle, in their teens; she hopes the harsh realities will show Sellamma that it's merely jungle, not some fantasized dream centre of a homeland. Instead, she finds Sellamma is one step ahead of her: she, in fact, leads her to the shocking devastation caused by illegal logging. Sellamma once more recreates her family's voices, and ends by saying that forgetting those voices would create a hole in one's memory. When she falls silent, Sumitra finds herself looking into her own memories, especially those inexplicable silences that lie behind the behaviour of her school friends, Christina, Aishah, her father and her mother. She is also suddenly frightened by the thought that she is only a negligible presence in that teeming night landscape.

With her newly opened eyes she sees in her father a ridiculous figure, and herself, as Hisham put it, as someone without firm ground under her feet. She is taken off his case, and he subsequently kills his father in a gruesome manner. She is unable to write that report on Sellamma, and sees only a terrible emptiness in the Department, her colleagues somehow trying to come through their daily lives, intact.

She packs up, and heads for Sellamma's place, to really see to the recreation of her memories and also to sort herself out. She rewrites the alternative file into a fuller and even self-indicting narrative. *Between Lives* is this

narrative, mainly following her awakening, in response to Sellamma's dramatized tales, to a truer sense of herself. Sellamma's tales tell of her father's ambition to really belong to the land. He tries to identify with it as a Malaikaran (Malay) would: he gets to the spiritual centre of the land with the help of Mat, he designs his house in the Malay style, and grows what they grow, besides Indian and Chinese crops, following Mat's methods. Sellamma and her sister, Anjalai, following his example, invest the land with their own dreams and even name their vegetable plot the Rama-Sita Grove, taken from the Ramayana to remind themselves they would truly come into their own homeland. But WW2 interrupts this assimilation. After the war, her brothers desert the land for the towns, thus breaking up the family. Her father sees that the encroaching racial divides, borne out of an emergent nationalism, will always prevent him from becoming a true citizen of the country. Disillusioned, he returns with his wife to India, but Sellamma stays on with her artist brother, to carry on the struggle.

Sumitra also records and links, through her developing and more inclusive consciousness, to this main narrative, the account of her mother's life with Jan, Nathan's confession about his ambition to truly belong to the country, Christina's confessions about her loss of self, her own memories, and stories from the media that shape and control her and other peoples' lives.

She is helped in this by the publicity she gets in the papers, after her excursion into the jungle with Sellamma. She hopes another family-humiliating article in the papers will bring her father out to Sellamma's place, and perhaps the rest of her family. Sellamma will see them, through her memory-eyes, as her own family, and go, with dignity, to her final rest.

Once again events don't happen as Sumitra expects, and Sellamma's place becomes the nooks and crannies she so glibly wrote about in a brief statement to the DH. Christina and Aishah turn up, showing, respectively, their fear and scepticism. Then Nathan appears, and Sumitra doesn't anymore see him as a threatening figure, only as someone who has been really concerned about her. And most unexpectedly, her mother arrives by herself in a taxi.

Her mother's account of her life with Jan, the midwife, when she ran away from home to continue her schooling reveals, horrifyingly, how insensitive Sumitra has been to her own mother's moods and withdrawals. But her appearance also allows Sumitra to really recreate Sellamma's past for her.

When her father finally comes, self-righteous and indignant, she puts him through the remembrance ritual she herself went through at Sellamma's hands. Her father at first resists, then working with the DH (suggested indirectly), he tries to be Sellamma's father, and persuades Sumitra's brothers to play along as

Sellamma's brothers. Sumitra's mother steps in now, and makes Sumitra's father and her brothers see how wrong they have been about her so-called unstable behaviour. In the final ritual, Sellamma feels touched and reassured by her reunion with her surrogate family. Sumitra's mother only comes into her own after she puts her mother-in-law through a ritual of humiliation.

When on her death bed, Sellamma bequeaths Sumitra her land, she doesn't know what to do with it, until the condominium-and-theme-park developer arrives and razes the other houses in the settlement. She now realizes that Sellamma's land is, in a symbolic way, her country, and that, as Sellamma used to say, life can't be traded for anything, not for a secure, comfortable existence or for wealth.

*Between Lives* now becomes a confrontation between the newly-emerged Sumitra and the SRD, or the powers-that-be. The developer, its representative, tries scare tactics on her: he demonstrates the ruthless destructiveness of the bulldozer, and makes his workers hurl mud and stone missiles at her house. But Sumitra resists him by building fences around her property.

Her mother who has gone back returns with her father. He strengthens the fences and installs a generator. This is his way of making up for betraying his family, and also himself. But the developer, now incensed, puts, the powers-that-be supporting him behind the scenes, an advertisement in the newspapers. This



advertisement is meant to drive home, terrifyingly, the message that Sumitra's defiance can become racial and lead to national chaos.

Sumitra, now realizing that the others must know what she really feels, shows Christina and Aishah the notebooks, where she has re-written the alternative file into the present narrative. Christina and Aishah see it not only as Sumitra's attempts to understand herself but also them, though they are not always positively presented, and their repressive society.

The alternative file very much in their minds, they take a ritual ramble through the land meant to exorcise their resentments and suspicions for each other, but also to show their true attachment to the land. Aishah, though a Malay, has also become displaced from her country by political ambition and materialistic greed. After their immersion in the river, they become sisters-in-struggle for a true homeland. They realize they can't be silenced anymore by the powers-that-be. They set up a web site, the other media being denied them, and put in Sumitra's narrative, together with their own advertisement. They hope that the silent majority will one day, soon, come out in their support, so they can all return from their exile in their own country.

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